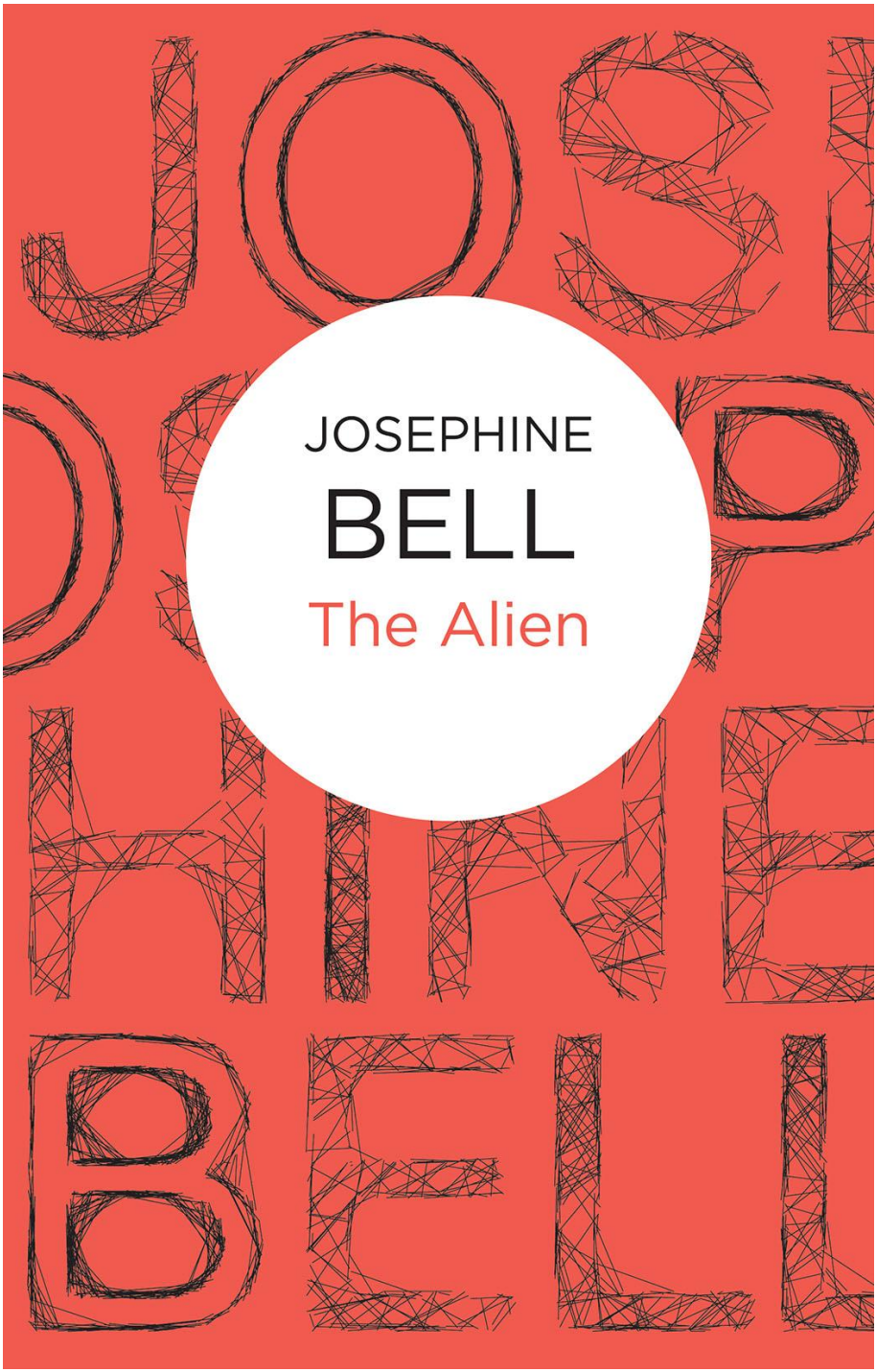
JOSEPHINE
BELL
The Alien

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Contents

Josephine Bell
Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen

Josephine Bell

The Alien

Josephine Bell

Josephine Bell was born Doris Bell Collier in Manchester, England. Between 1910 and 1916 she studied at Godolphin School, then trained at Newnham College, Cambridge until 1919. At the University College Hospital in London she was granted M.R.C.S. and L.R.C.P. in 1922, and a M.B.B. S. in 1924.

Bell was a prolific author, writing forty-three novels and numerous uncollected short stories during a forty-five year period.

Many of her short stories appeared in the *London Evening Standard*. Using her pen name she wrote numerous detective novels beginning in 1936, and she was well-known for her medical mysteries. Her early books featured the fictional character Dr. David Wintringham who worked at Research Hospital in London as a junior assistant physician. She helped found the Crime Writers' Association in 1953 and served as chair during 1959–60.

Chapter One

Snow had not fallen anywhere since the early morning. In the little town of Higlett in Yorkshire, on the south side of the bay of that name, an army of overcoated and red-faced men with shovels and picks had piled the icy slush into grey ramparts along the edges of the pavements and afterwards, working from lorries, had thrown down sand and salt on the main streets. The infrequent cars, making a dangerous way into the town in search of necessary provisions, their wheels festooned with chains, ropes and other contrivances, sent up a muddy spray as they passed, bespattering those who had to cross the road and were climbing slowly, precariously, over the swept heaps at the kerb.

Outside the town the snow lay white, untouched, a heavy obliterating blanket on the surrounding hills, on the fields smooth and empty, on the stone walls dividing them and on the wild land beyond where it swept round to the cliffs at the north end of the bay. A smooth, relentless, aching cold, the surface broken only by a single streak where the coast road ran out through the Higlett suburbs, gradually winding upwards past the last of the shops to the larger houses standing back in their gardens, on to the bleak stretch along the head-land that served the lighthouse on St. Jude's headland itself.

The sky had been overcast all that day, yellow-grey above the snow, promising another fall. The dusk came early, to turn the sea black where lately it had been invisible under the blizzard and before that for three days whipped into foam by an easterly gale. When the wind died, after backing into the north, the snow had continued to fall. Now, sheltered from the north by the cliffs, the waves had died down; the bay was a flat black lake on which a single ship lay anchored.

The last house on the coast road was brightly lit that afternoon, the lights shining all the more strongly for want of any curtains drawn across the windows. The effect was not one of warmth, or cosiness. A hard light from unshaded bulbs shone out on to the snow, bulky figures moved in the rooms. Two cars, with paper spread on their windscreens and sacking on their

bonnets, stood head to tail in the short, swept drive. They had made the hazardous journey at midday. Their owners, tired, cold, depressed, were now at odds with one another.

"Why doesn't he pack it in for today?"

"Why don't you ask him? *I* can't say anything."

The girl looked up at the young man beside her. He smiled unwillingly, but pulled her close against him.

"No, Ann darling, you can't say anything. You can just go on practising being patient with me when I let out my grouse on you—"

"Instead of on Colin," she interrupted. "Don't say it, Steve. I know."

"If he wasn't so damned *solemn*—We've *had* the funeral. Now it's only the furniture and things—"

"Would you expect him to cheer up on that account? Because he's disposed of them? Or because their things are now his? They were his parents, after all. Losing both together—"

"Within a fortnight. I know, I know."

"Together, near enough. It'd be a shock for anyone. For Colin it's a near disaster."

Stephen looked at her curiously. She seemed to be always, just now, defending his brother-in-law, who was no relation of hers. Even after they were married Colin would be only her sister-in-law's husband. No relation at all. She had often criticized Colin in the old days, when they were first engaged, for being stuffy, humourless, the perfect bureaucrat. Now it was just the opposite. Always excuses for him. Sympathy, pity, were charming up to a point. But the point had been passed.

"Keeping us sticking about while he sorts *papers*! I ask you, *papers*! As if he couldn't bring them all in the car and take them down to the hotel. It's fantastic!"

Ann drew away from him.

"How many times do I have to tell you he's very badly upset? Shocked and grieving. His biggest prop knocked from under him. I never knew them very well, living up here, but I thought they were a really splendid old couple."

Stephen offered her a cigarette which she refused, then lit one for himself before answering.

"Of course you're right about them," he said, quietly. "A prop for Colin. You mean, of course, that Margaret isn't."

She turned to him quickly.

"Look out. Mrs. Ogden."

They had been standing at the window of the former drawing-room, which had windows at both ends; one looking out over the narrow strip of front garden to the bay, the other on to the fair-sized garden at the back of the house. They turned together to face the door through which came an elderly woman, well wrapped up in a thick overcoat, a woollen shawl over it round her shoulders and a thick felt hat pulled down over her white hair.

As the two turned to face her she was suddenly bathed in a fierce red light that swung across the room and away. Ann gasped. Stephen gave a short laugh.

"St. Jude's light," he said. "Just come on, I suppose." He turned again to the window. "Look, Ann, it shines white out to sea, but we're in the red sector, meaning that a ship coming into that beam would be standing into danger, too near the shore."

"It frightened me," the girl answered. "I see what you mean. How on earth did the Brentwoods put up with it every night? Oh, there it comes again! I'd go scatty."

"They had long, very thick curtains, if I remember rightly. Didn't they, Mrs. Ogden?"

The old woman nodded. She stood in the doorway looking from the young couple to the labelled furniture, the table with its close ranks of ornaments and photographs, the stacked pictures, the rolled carpet.

"They've done in here, I take it?" she said, in her flat north country accent. "The dining-room and the study, too. Have you seen Mr. Colin, either of you?"

She spoke with the mixture of familiarity and respect usual in long-established servants who are also trusted friends.

"He's upstairs," Stephen said, impatiently. "God knows why he can't finish."

"The good Lord *do* know better than you do, Mr. Stephen," Mrs. Ogden rebuked him. "Mr. Colin was a good son. They were a loving united family. Now there's only him left, all alone."

Stephen and Ann exchanged glances.

"He has James and Sally," the girl said, quickly. "Only of course they're back at school now."

"He has my sister," Stephen said, rather too loudly.

"Oh, aye," Mrs. Ogden was beginning, when a voice from the door said, "What about your sister?"

Margaret Brentwood stood looking into the room, holding her soft fur coat to her neck with both hands.

"What about your sister?" she repeated, in a low, dragging voice that exposed to all of them her total exhaustion of body and spirit.

"Will Mr. Colin be finished soon, m'm?" Mrs. Ogden asked, intervening in a calm level voice. "Ogden has the kettle on the stove in the kitchen. I could make you all a pot of tea before you go."

"Wouldn't it mean more washing up, more work? I mean, heating more water? I thought we were going to turn the water off again? We shall have to, shan't we? Or the pipes will freeze. Mr. Colin wants to take you both down in the car with us when we go."

"We're very grateful, I'm sure," Mrs. Ogden said, briskly. "But I for one would prefer to walk. I'm used to weather and so's Ogden. Them cars is dangerous in snow. I'd be easier on my feet."

"Make the tea, Mrs. Ogden," Ann said. "We'd like a hot drink, wouldn't we, Steve?"

The latter murmured agreement and then moved to pull out one of the labelled chairs for his sister, who seemed to be swaying on her feet. Mrs. Ogden, nodding her head, moved across to the window, glancing through it as she passed.

"Still there," she said. "They may be Russians, but I wouldn't want any living soul to go through what they did two days back when their anchor dragged in the gale and they were like to go aground on the Head."

"I can't see anything."

"Where did Colin put the glasses?"

"In the hall, I think."

Stephen went quickly to the door. Margaret said, just too late. "Ask Colin first if you may borrow them. They were his father's."

Ann left the window to stand beside her fiancé's sister. She had always liked and admired Margaret, for her very English good looks, her beautiful home, her admirable children. She felt a little sorry for her, because Colin was such a bore, poor dear,

stiff and prim with F. O. written all over him, as she usually described him to her friends. But since yesterday her opinion of them both had changed. On the journey up in the Brentwoods' car Colin drove in spite of the weather with great competence, smoothly, fast, taking no chances, losing no opportunities. He spoke very little. His face still showed traces of shock, even now, nearly a month after the influenza deaths, within a week of one another, of his old parents. But he was not any longer absorbed in his own grief. He was thinking of their comfort and convenience, hers and Margaret's. It was the latter who gave a really lamentable display of frayed nerves, irritation, even bad temper. Ann had been quite ashamed of her, and very glad when Stephen had joined them, travelling in his own car, the next morning.

So now, as she stood looking down at Margaret's bowed head and self-absorbed misery, she could not help saying in a regrettably cold voice, "Doesn't Colin need you upstairs?"

Margaret jerked up her head.

"I wish he did!" she cried. "I wish he had ever needed me for anything. It might have helped. It might have prevented—"

She mastered herself, staring up into Ann's young face to search for any recognition there of her own plight or Colin's. She saw a kind of shrinking sympathy, mingled with incomprehension.

"He's so *unhappy*!" Ann said, trying to imagine what she would feel if Stephen suffered some grief he could not bring himself to share with her.

"Does that make it any easier for me?" Margaret whispered.

"You? Didn't you like them? Aren't you sorry, too? Don't you share even that?"

Ann was furious with herself for uttering these schoolroom platitudes, but what was there to say?

Margaret did not answer, only dropped her face in her hands and began to whimper. This was too much for Ann. She was a warm-hearted girl; she had, so far, missed any searing loss. She knelt down by the older woman and comforted her with another string of words remembered from books, from the nursery, from exchanges between her mother's friends, from any second-hand experience of grief that had come her way. Presently Margaret lifted her head and found her handkerchief in the pocket of the

fur coat she had not ceased to huddle about her.

"You're very sweet, Ann," she said jerkily. "I hope you're really in love with Stephen. You'll need to be, marrying into the Navy. Left alone so often, for so long. But if you love him it'll make – all the difference."

The difference I am meant to understand being, Ann thought, that she doesn't and never has loved Colin. Poor old Colin.

A crisp incisive voice from upstairs called, "Margaret!"

"I'm here," she answered, not raising her own voice at all.

Heavy steps sounded on the uncarpeted stairs. They came to an abrupt halt in the hall.

"Stephen! What on earth are you doing out there? Isn't it cold enough for you without having the front door wide open?"

Stephen could be heard stepping back. The door was closed.

"Sorry. I was looking at the cars. Hope they'll start. Also at that trawler in the bay. She's making ready to move, I think."

"Looking?"

There was a pause. Margaret got slowly to her feet and began to move towards the door.

"Yes. I borrowed these glasses. I hope you don't mind."

"I'm afraid I do mind." Colin's voice grated unpleasantly. "Those binoculars belonged to my father."

"I'm sorry," Stephen said quietly. He felt he had nothing to be sorry about, except perhaps upsetting Colin.

"The next time you want to borrow my things I'd be obliged if you would ask me first," Colin insisted.

"I've said I'm sorry."

Margaret, who had waited just inside the room until this moment, now went out into the hall.

"You called me, Colin?" she asked, ignoring Stephen, the binoculars now dangling by their strap from Colin's fingers and the whole childish dispute.

"Yes. That furniture in the second spare room, the small one. Is it likely to be any use to Stephen? If not I'll put it in the sale."

"I thought we decided—"

"You decided to ask Stephen. I thought that was what you came down to do. Apparently he was too busy with my binoc—"

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" Margaret said, on a note of desperation.

"Ann!" Stephen called into the room. "Run up with Colin and

Margaret, darling, and look at some more furniture. You'll know best if we're likely to want it or not." He turned to Colin and said with an effort, "I really do feel most terribly grateful to you for giving us first choice on—"

But Colin had turned his back and was already half-way up the stairs.

"I've annoyed him," Stephen whispered to Ann as she passed him. "I can't cope."

He went back into the drawing-room. A few minutes later, bored with having nothing to do, not prepared yet to rejoin Colin and feeling colder than ever after his visit to the parked cars and inspection of the Russian ship, Stephen went across the hall and into the former dining-room. It might help, he thought, to check the labels in that room and the study next to it. If Colin was going to cross-check the job they had been doing the whole afternoon they were going to miss dinner at the hotel. He felt that this would be a major disaster. At that moment what he longed for most was a double Scotch with a minimum of soda.

"Tea's ready, sir," Mrs. Ogden's voice reached him.

"They're all upstairs," he answered, moving into the hall. He shouted up the stairs, "Tea, all of you!" in a loud voice.

At that moment Mrs. Ogden screamed. Stephen was with her in an instant.

"It was a face!" the old woman told him, one hand at her neck, gasping. "A horrible face at the window!"

Stephen, relieved of his fear for her, could not prevent one raucous laugh. It was quite the right treatment, however, for Mrs. Ogden.

"It's no laughing matter," she said with dignity, if still a little breathless. "A man's face it was, staring in. With a great black beard on him."

"There's no one there now," Stephen pointed out very reasonably. But he moved across to the window and as he reached it the lighthouse beam crossed the front of the house and he saw, beneath the window in the red glare the black sprawled body of a man.

"You're right, by God!" he said quickly to Mrs. Ogden. "There *is* someone lying out there. Poor devil of a tramp, I shouldn't wonder."

He hurried out into the hall, shouting as he went, first for

Ogden, then Colin.

It took all three men to bring the unconscious figure into the house. He was tall, bulky, with a seaman's heavy jersey and serge trousers inside great sea boots. He was soaked to the skin in sea water, smelling of the sea and of oil. As far as they could tell, with the black hair plastered low on his forehead and the black beard covering the lower half of his face, he was not an old man, though his grey pallor did not suggest youth.

"Not on the floor," Colin panted, sensibly. "Pull out a row of plain chairs, Ogden. Not the upholstered ones. Too much draught on the floor," he explained, looking at Stephen.

"Quite," the young man answered shortly. Colin's unnecessary remarks and silly care for his furniture had flared his smouldering irritation. Another bloody delay, he told himself. God, would they ever get back into Higlett that night?

He felt Ann's hand slip into his.

"Who is it? How did you find him?" she asked quickly.

"Mrs. Ogden. Saw him looking in; just before he collapsed, poor chap."

"Where is Mrs. Ogden?" Colin said, impatiently. He and Ogden had stretched the limp body on the row of chairs and moved the oil heater close.

"Gone up with Margaret to get out some blankets to put over him," Ann said. "Can't we at least take off those boots? Before the ambulance—"

"What ambulance?" Colin asked coldly. "The telephone was disconnected a fortnight ago."

"Oh, then—"

"It's up to us," Stephen said. "Got any brandy in the house, Colin? Gin? Anything?"

"No."

"Right. I've got a tot in the car. I'll get it."

"I'll warm up this hot water again," Ann said. "Take too long to make fresh tea. The pot seems pretty good. Why did he have to come here, poor mutt, where we haven't even got a hot-water bottle handy?"

"Yes – why?" said Colin, slowly.

He was staring down at the man's jersey, at the broad chest that began to rise and fall now with deep breaths and shuddering sighs. For across it in letters that had once been

white and now were dirty yellow with age and oil was the word, ЛІНИН in Cyrillic letters. And this, he had made it his business to discover that morning in Higlett, was the name of the trawler that had taken shelter under St. Jude's Head and was, Stephen had told him, just now putting out to sea.

Chapter Two

Stephen, hurrying back into the room with his flask, found his brother-in-law standing quite still, staring down at the rescued man. The latter, on the other hand, was moving his head from side to side, opening and shutting his hands. He seemed to be in some danger of falling off his narrow berth.

"Hadn't we better prop him up a bit?" Stephen said. "What are you looking at?"

"The name on his jersey. The name of his ship. *Lenin*."

"Oh, that's what it means, is it? I wondered when I saw it on the trawler's stern as she moved off."

"You saw—?"

"Through the – through your glasses," Stephen explained. "Don't know their alphabet, but of course I noticed his jersey was the same. Anyway, there isn't any other ship in the bay. Look out, he'll be off there in a second!"

Stephen's embarrassment was relieved by their patient, who suddenly opened his eyes, lifted his head and began to struggle into a sitting position. The two men helped him up and while Colin steadied him Stephen poured a generous tot into one of the cups on the tray and Ann, who was back with the kettle, added some hot water.

"Down the hatch," Stephen said cheerfully, holding the cup to the man's lips. The seaman took it from him and though his hands shook violently, managed to hold it as he drank. When he had emptied it he held it out to Stephen, saying a few unintelligible words in a hoarse voice.

"Polish," said Colin.

"Polish for what?" Stephen demanded.

"He said 'God bless you'," Colin answered, gruffly.

"Poor devil. Lucky we were still here."

"My fault, that, wasn't it?" Colin said, with a bitter little smile.

"More brandy?" Ann asked firmly, determined to stop this futile, unseemly bickering. "Or tea this time?"

"No – understand," the man said slowly.

She held up the flask, pointing to it first, then to the teapot. He shook his head at the latter, but turned his eyes to the flask and nodding his head vigorously, said "*Da – da.*"

"He says yes," Colin translated. "Russian this time."

"So I gathered," Ann answered, laughing and pouring more brandy into the cup. A slow grin spread over the seaman's face.

Stephen turned to Colin, saying in a tone of exaggerated admiration, "I say, old boy, you don't half know your Iron Curtain lingoes, do you?"

Colin flushed angrily, but already Stephen's attention had moved back to the recovering victim, whose colour had changed remarkably for the better, whose eyes had brightened and who was smiling with open pleasure at Ann's half-anxious, half-pleased face close above his own.

It was the expression in his eyes, Stephen said afterwards, that brought recognition. The light flashed in his mind when the eyes widened and brightened as they used to do, as he had seen them do so many times at Margaret's approach when he himself, a boy at home on holiday from school, had found his sister was engaged to a friendly, exciting, inspiring foreigner, who apparently adored her. Her arrival on the scene had always heralded his own easy dismissal.

"You're Boris!" he cried. "You must be. Boris – Sudenic."

He remembered the surname with difficulty. After all these years he wondered at himself for remembering it at all. He had so seldom used it.

The man turned, reluctantly, it seemed; puzzled too and uncertain of himself.

"You *know* him?" Colin said, an incredulous note in his voice. "You can't know him! What makes you think—?"

But Stephen had gone closer, taking Ann's place, bending down towards the stranger to show him his own face.

"You're Boris. I know you're Boris. Your voice, the way you look, everything. You needn't be afraid of us. You must recognize me. Have another look. Who am I?"

"Stepan," the man said, getting to his feet. "Stev-en, Steven Len – Leng—"

"Stephen Lang."

They were clutching one another, laughing, patting one another's backs, swaying as the big Pole's uncertain balance

pulled Stephen from side to side. Then Boris collapsed sitting on one of the chairs he had left and Ann saw that tears were falling from his eyes to mingle with the other brine still dripping from his hair and beard.

"Who is he?" she cried. A reunion seemed utterly fantastic, impossible.

Stephen laughed. He was feeling almost hysterical. The surprise, the flood of old memories sweeping through him was too much, added to the day's frustration and discomfort.

"Ann," he said, loudly, "allow me to present to you the *ci-devant* Lieutenant Boris Sudenic, former aide to the Polish military attaché in London. Boris, this is my fiancée, Ann Phillimore."

Once more Boris staggered to his feet, took Ann's hand and bent automatically to kiss it, but stopped short, took back his own hand, looked at it with disgust, touched his beard and muttered in French, "*Mille pardons*, Mademoiselle." He shook his head, struggling on in English, "I – sorry. So – wet – so—"

He turned to Stephen, clasped him once more in a great bear hug and said earnestly, "The little Stephen! *Wonderbar!* To be – married – and to one so – beautiful."

He made another little bow in Ann's direction and once more Stephen saw the steady blue eyes light up with pleasure and boyish admiration.

All this time Colin had stood a little way off, not moving, not speaking, but watching intently every move the stranger made, noting every word he spoke. Ogden, too, when the recognition stopped him as he was leaving the room, stayed frozen by the open door, too astonished to move.

Colin now took a step forward, but before he could speak Mrs. Ogden and Margaret appeared, the former carrying blankets, the latter an old tweed coat, a shirt, a pullover and grey flannels she had found in one of the drawers upstairs. She was speaking as she came in.

"Has he come round? Oh, good. Wrap the blankets round him, Martha, and Ogden, you take these clothes and get him to change into them in the kitchen."

She stopped short when Stephen wheeled round to her.

"Don't you see who it is?" he shouted. "Look at him. Look at him!"

Margaret's face whitened but she held her head up, seeing Colin's face, beyond the stranger's, harden into a new despair. "Is it – It can't be—Boris Sudenic?"

Stephen gave a great laugh and clapped his friend again on the shoulder.

"Right first shot. Aren't you going to say how d'you do to her, Boris?"

The Pole took an uncertain step in Margaret's direction, looking back at Stephen as he did so.

"I – should know – this lady?" he asked, apologetically.

"You're damned right you should. Tell him, Margaret."

"Margaret! Oh!"

It was a long-drawn whispered sigh, followed by an uncomfortable silence.

"I recognized *you* at once," Margaret said, in a hard social voice. "Have I changed so very much?"

"We've all changed," Stephen said, awkwardly.

Boris took Margaret's hand between both of his.

"Forgive me," he said. "My head – it is not – it does not work —I was going to die I think on the—" He took his hands away and made a gesture of using a paddle. "A – wood – flat – with —"

He paddled again in the air and laughed suddenly.

"You came ashore on a life-raft?" Stephen suggested.

"O.K. O.K. Raft. That is the word. I – sorry – I speak so badly – your English."

"Have I changed so very much," Margaret repeated, "that you didn't recognize me? I knew you, even with your beard."

Boris took her hand again.

"When I leave England – so long ago – I have – in my heart – a girl – a pretty – a *gentille* – young girl. Like Ann here." He turned quickly to give her a brilliant smile, then turned back to Margaret and continued earnestly, "I find – a beautiful and gracious lady – with her little brother – a man – in a house that is – to leave – to empty—It is a dream perhaps? I die in the sea or the snow – in a strange dream?"

Margaret drew away her hand, turning to Colin, who came forward slowly.

"We are all quite real," she said, in the slow, rather loud voice the English use for speaking to foreigners. "We saw you outside

and brought you in. This is not our house, but I won't go into long explanations now. This is my husband, Colin Brentwood."

"Mr. Sudenic already knows that," said Colin, icily.

There was a heavy silence. Stephen and Ann were too surprised to move. Margaret looked at Colin with tired contempt. Boris waited, too polite to answer, or perhaps unable to command sufficient of the English language to sustain an argument.

The uncomfortable silence was relieved by Mrs. Ogden, who took the clothes from Margaret's arm and thrust them at her husband, who still waited near the door in a state of frozen astonishment.

"Old friend or not," she said, briskly, "the poor man needs to get those wet things off him or he'll be in for pneumonia, and then where'll we all be for neglecting him? Mr. Stephen, put this blanket round him and take him into the kitchen. You and Ogden between you can get him to strip and put on the things we looked out for him. Not that they'll be much of a fit, but you'll have to do your best. The sooner we're all out of here now, the better, I'm thinking.

I'm sorry if I seem a bit blunt, Mrs. Colin, but there's things to be done now and Mr. Colin'll have to do them, I reckon."

She stopped speaking, out of breath, but as firm as ever. The people in the room obeyed her without question. Boris, giving Ann another smile and glance, meekly submitted to being draped in a blanket and led away. Ann went upstairs to restore order where Margaret and Mrs. Ogden had disarranged the drawers in their search for clothing. Colin and Margaret were left to themselves.

As soon as the room was free of the others Colin went to the window and stood there with his back to his wife, staring at the empty sea. Margaret dropped into the nearest chair. Her face was suddenly cold, she felt sick, the room was spinning round her.

"I think I'm going to faint," she managed to say in a small clear voice, trying to get her head down between her knees.

Colin was in time to prevent her slipping to the floor, though her recovery might have been quicker if she had indeed lain

there. However, her collapse was brief and Colin was both helpful and quick in ministering to her. He found a few drops of brandy left in Stephen's flask. The much-neglected tea, still surprisingly hot, he also forced down Margaret's unwilling throat, in spite of her protest that she really would be sick if she drank it. She was not sick and presently was able to transfer herself with Colin's help to one of the arm-chairs, where she lay back thankfully and shut her eyes.

Colin watched her for a few minutes. His raging jealousy, suppressed, controlled, fought with futile argument, had, in the brief minutes of his learning Boris's identity, exploded into rage and hate. For fifteen years he had fought a memory, a dream, an illusion, that had stood between him and his love. He had despaired of ever laying this ghost, who continued to possess his wife's heart, to whom she always returned, who relentlessly, it seemed, defeated all his efforts and hopes to win her back into the real world of the living. For years now he had accepted defeat. It was impossible to fight a wraith, an idealized paragon, a romantic martyred hero. But the defeat, the humiliation, the plain natural jealousy had festered. To what extent, he was, just now, in the fury of release, incapable of understanding. He only knew that he had a real, a living, adversary at last and perhaps the power to destroy him.

"Who is this man?" he said, at last, wishing to have it formally acknowledged.

Margaret turned her tired, astonished eyes on him.

"Who? Boris, of course. As you've heard. As you must have guessed. *The* Boris." She closed her eyes. "The only Boris I've ever met," she went on, enjoying the sound of the name she had so seldom spoken aloud for twenty long years.

"The man you were engaged to before the war?"

"Yes. Of course."

"You told me he was dead."

She opened her eyes again, wide with indignation. "I *thought* he was dead. I never heard definitely. Was that surprising? Knowing what happened in Poland?"

He had to acknowledge it was not. He was still shaking with rage, forcing himself to control his voice and his impulse to attack.

"You aren't suggesting that I *knew* he was alive, are you?"

“I’m not suggesting anything.”

“Oh, but I think you are. You always do. If I had known, I wouldn’t have been – I wouldn’t have—”

She stopped as the chill thought came to her that Boris, alive, had made no effort to find her. She had tried, through the Red Cross, to find him, but he had not tried to find her. Or perhaps he could not. That must be it. After all, he had come to them from a Russian ship. A prisoner. All these years. While she—

“The Russians must have caught him and kept him,” she said. “That’s why I could never find out what had become of him. He went back to fight, but you know that. I’ve told you often enough. He was recalled months before war was declared. They knew in Poland, of course. He must have been caught between the Germans and the Russians. That’s what I’ve always thought. Haven’t I?”

“It’s certainly possible.”

Margaret was sunk too deeply in her own confusion to notice the bitter tone in Colin’s voice. The dangerous myth on which she had sustained and balanced her surviving girlhood, a frail bridge over which she had refused to pass, which she had been unable to leave, was now giving way beneath her, fatally cracked, irreversibly falling. She was too shocked, too frightened to rush forward to firm ground, to safety. Instead she clutched the insubstantial fabric of her myth. Boris had come back to her at last.

“He hasn’t changed much,” she said, smiling faintly.

Colin looked at her with contempt, remembering, because he had never forgotten, a photograph of the man she had once shown him and which he was sure she still treasured.

“Would you have recognized him if Stephen hadn’t?”

“Of course.”

“He didn’t recognize you.”

It was true. She still felt the pain of that cruel blow. But Colin must not know this.

“Poor man! After getting ashore in that icy water—He must have nearly died. No wonder he passed out when he’d struggled up from the beach. Would you recognize friends you hadn’t seen for over twenty years if you’d just done what he did?”

She was talking too fast and too excitedly, she knew, but she couldn’t stop.

“I think it’s a miracle he made it at all. But he was always enormously strong. He swims like a fish. He can do anything in boats. I remember going sailing with him once—”

She forced herself to stop. Colin’s face, which she had only just noticed, frightened her.

“He ought to be changed by now,” she said, more calmly. “I want to know why he came here. It’s so extraordinary. An almost unbelievable coincidence.”

“Exactly,” said Colin dryly, turning towards the door as he heard footsteps. “The coincidence *is* unbelievable, isn’t it?”

Chapter Three

The footsteps were not those of the fugitive, but belonged to Stephen and Ann. The pair of them were in high spirits, with flushed faces and bright eyes. They showed every sign of pleasure at the afternoon's developments.

"Only half an hour ago," Stephen said, directly he and Ann were inside the room, "I was in a filthy mood, binding about the weather, and the general upheaval here and—"

He stopped, careful now not to upset Colin again.

"And now," Ann said, skilfully side-stepping, "he's on top of the world because his schoolboy hero's turned up again. And I must say, he does seem to be very good value."

"Hi!" Stephen warned. "No responses from you in that direction, my girl. Boris may be only a little above himself after his trip ashore, but there's a certain wolfish look about him now that I don't recollect from time past."

"You were too young to notice it. I bet it was there," Ann retorted.

"Margaret'll tell us. Was it, Margaret? Did you have to fight for your position?"

She turned a pale, set face to them.

"Sorry," she said, coldly. "I'm afraid I wasn't listening to you two."

Ann and Stephen exchanged glances but wisely said no more.

"What on earth is the fellow doing?" Colin asked, impatiently, looking at his watch. "Surely it didn't take him all this time to strip and get into dry things?"

"Ogden and I gave him a pretty good towelling to start with," Stephen answered. "He was shivering horribly by the time we'd peeled everything off him. Incidentally, Ogden's got a wonderful heat up in the kitchen. I don't know why we've all been congealing in here with this piddling little oil stove."

"I told Ogden to use up the fuel that was left," Colin answered, severely. "No point in leaving it lying around till the house is sold. There wouldn't be any left by then, I don't mind betting. Not with this weather."

Margaret roused herself.

"He must be dressed by now. For some time, I should think. Because you've been talking to him, too, haven't you, Ann?"

"He was telling us how he got ashore," the girl answered. "Thrilling. I expect he'll tell you when he's quite ready."

"D'you mean he was actually dressing with Ann there?"

Stephen took an impatient step towards his sister. "For God's sake," he complained, "can't you snap out of this very corny, not to say Victorian drama? The poor devil's had a ghastly time for twenty years. *Twenty years!* He's lucky to be still alive. He'll tell you."

"And jolly lucky to get away today," Ann took up the tale. "He's been wondering if he could manage it. This is the first time he's served on a trawler outside the Baltic, though he's been a sailor now for about seven years. So when they put into the bay here—"

"Imagine it!" Stephen broke in. "Fishing just outside the three-mile limit, with England there, only three miles away. They had bad visibility several days but when the gale blew out and the snow stopped it was absolutely clear everywhere."

"That was when he decided to have a bash at it," Ann picked up her cue neatly. "He was on deck watch by himself. The others were all below except for an officer in the deck-house. When the light came on at the Head it shone on them as it moved. This made the darkness much blacker just after it passed. You know, the way it does in a car when another car's headlights—"

"We both know that one," Colin said, dryly. "He took advantage of this to untie a raft, collect a paddle of some sort, lower the thing into the water, get on to it without help of any kind and move away silently without attracting anybody's notice until he was outside the range of their revolvers."

"Did he tell you all this before, then?" Ann asked, innocently. "Because that was just about how he did it."

"But not in one continuous operation, as Colin suggests," added Stephen. "Because it's obvious, as Colin means us to realize, that it couldn't be done like that. It took him three hours, working a bit at a time, to get ready. Or so he says."

"His English must have improved tremendously since he arrived," said Colin.

Margaret lifted her hand wearily and let it fall.

"You don't believe him, do you?" she said.

"Quite frankly," Colin answered, "I don't."

"Why not?"

"Because Russian security is very thorough, very careful. He'd have been spotted."

"But he's *here*!" Ann said, with exasperation in her voice. "He actually *did* get away."

"Or he was allowed to get away. Ordered to, perhaps. He may be here on a mission."

"A *mission*!" Three puzzled faces stared at Colin. "What mission?"

"That remains to be seen. You are all pretending to be very slow in the uptake. Have you never heard of spies being put ashore as refugees?"

Stephen shook off the suggestion with a violent movement of his head.

"Rubbish! D'you actually mean cloak and dagger stuff?"

"I think he heard that," said Margaret quietly, turning away as Boris came into the room.

He now presented a very strange, if not extravagant appearance. His hair and beard, rubbed dry, but not brushed or combed, stood out in a fuzzy mass from his head and face, a youngish, dark Father Christmas or King Lear. The sleeves of the pullover were four inches short and as he had not been able to get into the tweed jacket, he wore it draped over his shoulders with the sleeves tied together across his chest. The flannels, too, were a poor fit. Too wide in the waist he had folded them in several places and hitched them up under a belt. This made them even shorter in the leg than they would have been otherwise. The generally wild, even fierce, effect of all this was softened and made pathetic by a pair of carpet slippers of Ogden's, the only things he had on that seemed to be of the right size.

"You look – stupendous," said Stephen.

"Smashing," said Ann, kindly.

Boris turned a puzzled face from one to the other.

"The English having a temporary setback?" asked Colin, waspishly.

"*Pardon?*" Boris said, in French.

Colin immediately burst into a rapid flow of Polish. Boris

stiffened, then his face set hard. But by the time Colin stopped for want of breath or perhaps stuck for a word, the refugee was obviously deeply moved. His voice, as he answered in the same language, faltered and broke.

"What's he saying?" Ann demanded.

"He says," Colin told her, with a disagreeable twist of his lips, "that the sound of his own tongue after so many years is almost painful. He asks me if I know Russian."

Without waiting for an answer he turned back and continued the conversation. To the other three the two languages were indistinguishable, but in fact he spoke now in Russian.

"Why have you come here?" he repeated his former question.

"To escape. I will ask for political asylum in England."

"Why did you come to this house?"

"But I told Stephen and Ann. Because I landed on the beach below here. The tide is coming in still and I made for the foot of the cliffs at once. I did not want to be cut off. I looked for a path. I found one and started to climb. I did not know where I was."

"Why didn't you walk along the beach to the town? There are no cliffs there."

"I was afraid. First of the tide cutting me off. And then that I might be followed. There was shouting and lights on the water after I got away."

"But no searchlights?"

"From the ship, no. The lighthouse was good for that."

"But your trawler had some kind of searchlight?"

"Yes."

"They did not use it?"

"No."

"I see. So you wanted to leave the beach as quickly as possible?"

"Certainly. To find houses – people – help – as soon as I could."

"And you arrived here, though the cliff path comes out on the road several houses down from us."

"I saw the lights here. I knew there would be people."

"You knew who would be here. You expected to find my parents. You were meant to find Mr. and Mrs. Brentwood."

"I don't understand you."

The others had drawn closer. Colin's voice, fluent, cold, swept on. Boris's answers grew shorter, sharper and his face darkened in anger. Quite suddenly he turned to Stephen and said in English, "I think this man – mad. He imagined I here – here – that I know – *him*. By his wife—Impossible!"

Stephen did not understand this at all, but Margaret did. Flushing crimson, she took a step towards Colin.

"Are you really accusing him of coming here as a spy? A complicated Russian plot? You're perfectly crazy, as Boris says. Particularly to suggest it to him to his face."

"Oh!" Ann exclaimed. "But how *super*! You mean the Russians know he was engaged to Margaret and that she married Colin, high up in the Iron Curtain section of the Foreign Office and that his parents lived here and so if they put Boris ashore in Higlett Bay he would simply *filter* down to Colin with really splendid opportunities. Oh, Boris," she went on, "have you really been cast for such a wonderful melodrama part? Have you really?"

Boris shook his head. Her rapid flow of unfamiliar idiom had defeated him. He looked helplessly at Colin, who stared back, fully occupied with mastering his temper and quite unable to answer anyone.

Stephen broke up the log jam of cross purposes and conflicting emotions.

"The point, as I see it," he said, loudly and briskly, "is to get out of here and down to Higlett."

"The town – yes," said Boris, eagerly, pleased to pick up a glimmer of sense from the surrounding obscurities. "The town, I want. Your police—I go first to ask. No?"

"They can wait for a couple of hours," Stephen answered. "You're coming straight to our hotel and the best meal they can put on for you. It's an occasion, damn it!"

"He must go straight to the police station," Colin said, firmly.

"Oh, have a heart!"

"I repeat, straight to the police station. You will lay yourself open to various charges if you take him anywhere else."

"I'm not going to abandon him to cocoa, bread and marge. That's flat."

Ann, who on hearing Stephen's plan had gone into the hall to fetch her coat, now came back with it on and a scarf tied round her head. Boris looked at her with renewed admiration.

“This custom has arrived here?” he asked, making gestures to indicate her headgear. “Like the peasants in my country?”

“It began in the war,” Margaret said, pulling out her own scarf from the pocket of her fur coat. “When everyone gave up wearing hats.”

“I find it – most becoming,” Boris said, gravely, glancing from one to the other.

Outside, the engine of Stephen’s car came to life, hicupped and died. A few seconds later it burst out again and settled down to a steady hum.

“Come along,” Ann said, taking Boris firmly by the arm. “You’re coming with us.”

Boris looked thoughtfully at Colin and then back at the girl.

“I go – first – to the police,” he said, gravely.

“We’ll see about that,” she answered. “I think we ought to go first to the hotel and get some sort of overcoat for you.”

This brought Boris, who had begun to move, to another dead stop.

“My clothes,” he said.

“Ogden!” Colin called out in a loud voice. “Bring this man’s wet things here, please.”

Ogden, who had prepared for this moment, appeared immediately with a round, heavy bundle, wrapped in an old piece of canvas.

“Best I could do, sir,” he said, handing it to Boris. It was clear that he addressed himself to the latter, not to Colin.

“I thank you for – everything,” Boris said with feeling.

“You’re welcome, I’m sure,” Ogden insisted.

Colin said nothing, nor did Boris look again in his direction. But as he reached the door he turned to bow politely to Margaret.

“*À bientot*,” he said, gently, and went away with Ann still holding him by the arm.

There was a silence in the room, broken by Ogden.

“That poor gentleman has some stories to tell, I’ll be bound,” he said, his general excitement getting the better of him. “Scars! You’d hardly credit it. Back. Beatings, that was. Ankles. Chains, he said. Right arm broken some time, he didn’t tell us how. Burns on his hands and chest, deliberate—”

“Stop!” Margaret screamed. She clapped her hand to her

mouth and turned, groping for a chair.

"Get out!" Colin said, furiously.

Ogden, wounded, but aware that he had forgotten himself, said with dignity, "Beg pardon, I'm sure, m'm. But it made me wild to see it. On our side, too, wasn't they? The Poles and the Russians, both? Criminal lunacy, I call it."

Before Colin could repeat his order, which he was about to do, even more forcibly, Ogden disappeared, making his way back to the kitchen where Mrs. Ogden had just finished tidying up. He relieved his feelings by describing to her, in full detail, the various marks of brutality he had noticed on the fugitive's body.

"Won't be no trouble him getting asylum or whatever they call it," he said. "Not when he says what they did to him."

"I should hope there won't be trouble, as you call it. With him a friend of the family? What an idea!"

"I don't know so much about friend," Ogden returned, stubbornly. "In my opinion Mr. Colin isn't too pleased he's turned up."

"How d'you know he isn't pleased? It's his way. Always did object, from a child, to anything out of the ordinary." She pulled her felt hat down more firmly. She had already removed her overall and rolled it up in a bundle with several other of her possessions. "Are they ready to go? I can't do no more here myself. There's just the cistern to empty, when you've turned off the main. That and lock up. They can leave it to us if he'll trust you to do it."

"Better ask him, then," said Ogden, gruffly. "I'm seeing to the boiler here." He had no wish to go back into the other room at present.

Once Ogden had gone Margaret managed to pull herself together. Colin, more exasperated than ever, watched her sit up, blow her nose, attend to her make-up and adjust her head scarf.

"Ready?" he asked, at length.

"Yes."

They were in the hall when Mrs. Ogden came out of the kitchen. Colin agreed at once to everything she proposed. His only wish just now was to leave Margaret at the hotel and go on to the police station.

As they were moving off in his car Colin told her this. She did not speak, so he went on irritably, "I don't want Stephen playing

the fool over this. It isn't a thing to be taken lightly.''

That roused her.

"I don't think Steve *is* taking it lightly. I don't think giving a good meal to a hungry, cold, shocked man is a comedy act at all.''

"The police are quite humane. They can and do provide proper food when necessary. The point is he must go to them *first*.''

"He intended to. Didn't you hear him say so?''

"I don't know that I can trust him.''

Margaret stared through the windscreen at the piled snow drifts, white and sparkling in the beam from the headlights. She said, passionately, "Don't you think he has suffered enough?''

Chapter Four

The London home of the Brentwoods was in Kensington, lying between Notting Hill Gate and the High Street, but closer to the former. It did not form part of a square, but simply one of a row, with gardens at the back and a mews beyond the gardens. Being situated on the side of a hill the garden lay at a lower level than the front of the house, so that to reach it you had to walk down iron steps from a small iron balcony which led out of the ground-floor drawing-room. The tradesmen's entrance, still marked as such at the Brentwood establishment, simply ran down an inclined path beside the house to semi-basement kitchen premises, whose main source of light at the back was a large window, strongly barred, lying underneath the iron balcony. In the front an area window provided a distorted view of the street and the front door.

Unlike many of the houses in that district the Brentwoods' was as broad as it was high. It had rooms on either side of the front door and a mere two storeys in all. This fact, in contrast with most of the other roads in the neighbourhood had to be repeated and impressed upon the Ogdens for several months after they settled there. Even in June they were still grumbling mildly over the perpetual 'up and down' which they so much resented. And from unshakeable suspicions of damp, mildew and other troglodyte menaces, they had moved on, as summer advanced, to hints of suffocation, oven-life and melting.

They did not, however, threaten to return north. Their devotion to Colin, which he found touching and Margaret a surprise, was entire. They could not understand why the Brentwoods had found servants so difficult to get and so impossible to keep, before they themselves took the post. But they simply accepted the general reference to foreigners without attempting to discover the details of their failure. They even tried to tolerate the Swiss *au pair* girl, Louise, who was staying on to complete her year with the Brentwoods. Between themselves they felt they were protecting Mr. Colin from inevitable exploitation by such people. At any rate Mrs. Ogden

had now reduced the kitchen to order and restored the pots and pans to a proper condition of bright cleanliness after their misuse in preparing the ‘foreign messes’ that Louise had inflicted upon the household.

The Brentwoods submitted to this return to tradition with thankfulness, tinged on Margaret’s part with a small guilt. Colin was merely thankful. It served to keep fresh his memory of his home, without which life for him would be dark indeed. Eating Mrs. Ogden’s roast beef and Yorkshire pudding took him back firmly to his boyhood. This and other manifestations of continuity, of permanence in his present circumstances, were very necessary to him. They made unharassed work possible, relieved anxieties he could barely control and tears he refused to acknowledge openly, but from which, on that account, he suffered all the more.

Margaret’s small guilt derived from her knowledge that she was so much better off than her friends and that this happy state was none of her own doing, but solely Colin’s. She had always understood her very real debt to him. It did not improve their relationship, rather the reverse. The more he loved her, the more he gave her, the more she resented her failure to equal his gifts, even to admire the giver. Not only in his attitude to herself but in his whole life and attainments. It was some quality in herself that stopped her, that drove her to criticize even his friends for praising his brains, his hard work, his loyalty. When her own friends, envying her new freedom from housework and cooking said, “Colin again! My dear, you’re the luckiest woman I know,” she felt like slapping their faces. And then the guilt returned. For it wasn’t only the Ogdens she must thank Colin for. It was Boris. The small uncomfortable guilt of March had grown into the delicious guilt of June.

One day in the middle of the month Margaret took the newspaper and a book to the end of the garden where she arranged herself on a brightly-coloured canvas and chrome metal day-bed, piled with cushions, to wait for Boris. He had telephoned that morning to say he would come between two and four. All very proper and above-board. The Ogdens were devoted to Mr. Sudenic. They had not forgotten his arrival in the snow. Louise, who attended English language classes at the Institute, would be out.

Arranging the day-bed in the shade of their two trees, Margaret looked about her. The gardens of these houses were small, long in proportion to their width. They gave very little privacy, since the back windows of their neighbours, as well as their own, gave a good view of the whole of at least three gardens, together with a partial view of the mews beyond, where the Brentwoods garaged their car. A door in the high wall at the end of the garden gave easy access to the mews. To secure a small part of the garden from prying eyes Colin had put up a short length of wattle fence not far from the two trees. On the side of this facing the house he had grown climbing roses, which were now all in bloom.

Margaret pulled the day-bed close to this screen where part of it afforded a deep shadow for her head while on the rest of its length the sun filtered through leaves in a pattern she found entrancing. Even in London, she thought, the garden is beautiful, almost as beautiful as it was at home the year before the war. She laughed at herself for the comparison, recklessly happy, reaching back, as usual now, to her young pleasures and fulfilments, her easy existence, her natural assumption of prosperity and safe living.

Before stretching out on the cushions she looked up sharply at the windows along the row. All empty except one, the inevitable exception, Flora, Lady Cotville. The old woman lived at her window. There was never a day when she was not there with her high-brushed mass of white hair, yellow in the front where it was stained by tobacco smoke from her eternal cigarette, her high-necked, lace-fronted blouse, her gold watch pinned to the lace, her rings, her sad ivory face. Does she count his visits, Margaret wondered. She can't possibly see me when I lie down, but is that a good thing or not? Is she a menace or just the pathetic old bore she seems to be when I visit her? Perhaps I'd better take her in some roses. She likes that. "I've admired them so much from afar, my dear. It'll be heaven to smell them as well." Keeping up with what she thought was the fashionable idiom, poor old thing.

Folding back the newspaper Margaret felt goodwill to all pour through her in a generous flood. Colin included. It was a day when he was not likely to be home early for dinner.

From the open window of the drawing-room, Louise, standing

a little back in the shadows of the room, watched Margaret's head disappear below the wattle fence. She then closed the window and drew the curtains across it. This was an ordered regulation because the sun would shortly move round to flood the room and might bleach the valuable carpet. Louise approved of the regulation. She had been brought up to believe that windows were there to be shut against excessive cold, unusual heat and all draughts.

Having finished with the window and its curtains she went across the room to where another pair of windows looked out on the road. From here, by craning her neck, she could see part of the main thoroughfare with the buses and heavy traffic pouring along it. She stayed watching until she saw a tall figure swing round the corner in her direction. Then she drew back until the figure, passing the window, raised a hand and turned a smiling face in welcome.

Immediately she went out into the hall and when the bell rang below in the Ogdens' quarters she leaned over the basement staircase and called, "I am going out. I will open the door. Do not you come up."

"Ask her if it's Mr. Sudenic," Mrs Ogden said. "She'll know. She's always at the window."

Mrs. Ogden had her feet up after lunch and was not inclined to move.

"Is it Mr. Sudenic?" Ogden called out.

"I do not know. I open the door – yes?"

"You do that, miss," came the answer. "If it's Mr. Sudenic show the gentleman into the drawing-room and inform Mrs. Colin. In the garden, she is."

"I do that," Louise called back. The bell rang again.

Directly she opened the door Boris snatched her hand, held it while he closed the door and then drew her into the drawing-room. Having shut that door too he put both arms round her and kissed her long and hard.

Louise came up from the kiss with a sigh of content, followed by a smile.

"Darling," said Boris, fervently, "You are beautiful like a dream."

"That is not very original."

"In English, I cannot yet be original. You prefer I tell you in

French or in German? Or perhaps in Polish. There I can be most original, but you do not understand.''

"We must speak in English. I am here to learn this language.''

"The hard-working Swiss. Wonderful. I tell you again then – but not speaking.''

The next kiss told Louise more than any words could do in whatever language. But she did not lose her head. After all, she had known about Boris's feelings for over a month and she was a very sensible girl with her European feet well on the ground.

So now, though gentle and smiling up at him, she pushed him slowly away.

"You must go to her,'' she said. "In the garden. She waits for you.''

Boris nodded, gravely. In spite of his delight in the girl he had never taken her into his confidence in any direction, neither telling her about his past, nor very much about his present life in London. And whenever she tried to discover his future plans he always managed to switch the inquiry to her own. Louise was aware of all this and naturally curious. But she also rather enjoyed the mystery, because she rightly felt it was a true one. This was no charlatan but a man of strange and terrible experiences. One day, she promised herself, she would make him speak. But not yet.

"Well, go then,'' she laughed, giving him another little push. "She may have heard the bell. It rings below and Mrs. Ogden has always the windows open.''

With a quick final kiss Boris turned towards the curtained opening to the balcony. But Louise, remembering, ran up to hold him back.

"You have not said where we meet tonight. I stop you too soon.''

Boris gave her his warm smile but his eyes were withdrawn, wary.

"*Je regrette infiniment*. Not tonight, *mon amour*. Tonight I have business, very important business.''

She could not argue with the finality of this statement. She pouted and shrugged and let him go. Soon, she told herself. He will not always keep me out. Then, remembering that she was supposed to be going to her language class, though it was now far too late to do so, she crept out of the front door, closing it

loudly, but without locking it, and then, opening it again without noise, made it fast and tiptoed into Colin's study, the room on the other side of the front door, to wait.

Boris put aside the curtain, unfastened the window and stepped out on to the iron balcony. He stood there for a few seconds, marvelling that the scent of roses was able to reach him through the petrol-laden air. The narrow strip of garden was bright with flowers, the lawn green where the sprinkler had refreshed it, though it was never able in term-time quite to recover from the scuffing feet of the Brentwood boy and girl. The surrounding houses gleamed white and grey beyond the gardens and the mews, veiled by occasional trees such as those beneath which he knew he would find Margaret.

As he went down the steps and reached the bare patch at the edge of the grass he looked back. The curtain hung discreetly straight at the drawing-room window. There were no faces at the glass below. He turned from the grass to follow the paved path beside the flower-border. From here, as he came to the wattle fence with its burden of roses, he bent to smell them, looking up sideways at the houses flanking the one he had left.

The old woman was there, of course, as always. She did not seem to move but he knew her eyes had followed him from the moment he had first come into her field of vision. He straightened up and went round the corner of the fence.

This part of the little garden had charmed him from the first moment he saw it, in the early spring, with snowdrops, crocuses and daffodils under the trees in delightful succession, while the buds slowly swelled into leaf on their bare branches. Piled in one corner against the wall was the original Victorian rockery, now given over to ferns and in the spring, following the daffodils, a carpet of lilies of the valley, those hardy fragrancies that thrive so well in the London air. The flowers were over now but the leaves, smooth, broad, dark green, made a quiet background to the ferns and the old soot-rotted stones. In front of this stood the sycamore that provided most of the shade. Nearby was the white double cherry, still a glory of blossom, though the silver was beginning to tarnish and the coarse grass under the trees was sprinkled with fallen petals. In the corner of the wall opposite the rockery the small green-painted door into the mews was doubly fastened on the inside with a lock and a

chain and padlock. The wall above was set with vicious glass spikes and an outward curving reinforcement of barbed wire.

Boris glanced quickly round that green seclusion with his usual approval. Then he went up close to the striped day-bed where Margaret lay still with closed eyes. He judged correctly that she was not asleep and had heard his approach.

"*La belle au bois dormant*," he said, gently.

Margaret instantly opened her eyes to meet his smile with her own.

"Are you the prince?" she asked, lightly, not moving. "After a hundred years?"

It was a pretty obvious cue, if he had wanted to take it. He did not take it. He laughed, looking about for somewhere to sit. Margaret swung her feet down and moved along a little.

"There's the other end of this thing," she said. "But your weight may tip it up if you sit too near the end. Or there are deck-chairs under the balcony steps."

With a sharp pang of disappointment she watched him go away to fetch a chair. As he was unfolding it she said, with exaggerated casualness, "Sorry I didn't bring one out here. I wasn't sure when you'd be coming."

This implied a lack of courtesy that Boris felt he must defend.

"But I telephoned. You answered yourself. I said I would 'look in'. That is the phrase, I think."

"It is, but it can mean you may not do so. It is fairly non-committal."

"None—"

She explained. They had a short, very boring discussion of the English language.

"Well," Margaret said, when she had managed to stop his questions, "now tell me about the new job. Is it to be permanent?"

He spread out his hands.

"How can I know? They give me six months and to have my permit renewed later. The British are sympathetic but very careful."

"So we should be. But I'd have thought, knowing your history, knowing you were *persona grata* when you came to us before the war, they'd make an exception."

Boris did not answer at once. Then he said, "We have

discussed this question before, Margaret. So many times. It is good that I stay – for six months – perhaps a year—"

"Perhaps for always if you get naturalized," Margaret urged.

"Perhaps."

His smile turned her heart over but he did not move from his chair, just lay back, quite evidently delighting in his surroundings, in the sunshine beyond their shade, in the filtered light where they sat, even in herself. But as part of his surroundings only, her mind told her, bitterly.

"This job," she said. "You haven't said anything about it. Is it whole-time?"

"Yes. It is much better than the little lectures at the university and the lessons in languages. There is no one to learn Polish and to teach Russian makes me ill."

"Sick," she corrected automatically. "Go on."

"This company, Swedish, you know, trades in the Baltic. I have been seven years on Russian ships in the Baltic. My – experiences, – is useful to them. My exact job is to translate and write letters."

"I see. D'you like the work?"

"It is a job," he said, gravely, without enthusiasm. "The pay is good."

That was self-evident. He hardly looked the same man as the rough, hairy, sea-racked creature who had caused such a sensation emerging on to the cliffside at Higlett Bay. He was clean-shaved now, though the shadow of his beard was always present on his lean jaw. His hair, abundant though it was, lay in a controlled sweep back from his forehead. His face without the beard was narrower than it had appeared before, and with better living and the sun of that excellent summer, had turned an attractive brown. With his blue-grey eyes he might belong to any northern European country, Margaret thought, or even to America, though the faces there, she had noticed on two visits with Colin, were predominantly round or square. His clothes were good, chosen, as one would expect, with taste and economy. The suit he wore that afternoon was one she had not seen before.

"The pay must be very good," she said, lightly, "if you can afford a new suit like that one. Who made it?"

He gave her the name of Colin's tailor.

"Did Colin tell you where to go?"

"Stephen. You like it – my suit?"

"Very much." She laughed. "Colin converted Stephen three years ago." She went on, thoughtfully, "Do you see much of Stephen? And Ann?"

"Of Stephen, yes, we meet. Ann, once, perhaps. She is so charming. So pretty. He is like a watch-dog when he has her with him."

He laughed loudly. Margaret made a feeble effort to join in.

The conversation began to wilt. It had moved so far from her desires that she began to feel both dull and hopeless. Boris was too good, too loyal. He assumed her total fidelity to Colin. How could she begin to tell him the dreary facts of her marriage when he gave her no possible excuse to do so? If he was hiding his own feelings it was noble, but unutterably useless and frustrating. A waste, a waste, her heart beat out, nearly choking her. With all that was unspoken between them it was not surprising that his visits, his frequent visits, were becoming a bore. But it was not possible for her to break the barrier; her upbringing and her basic common sense that lay always beneath her adolescent dreams, told her that this would be fatal to her relentless hopes.

She yawned and suggested tea. Boris said he must go. He had an appointment. It was for this he had the afternoon free to visit her on his way.

"My firm considers that we lunch from twelve until three. My appointment therefore it is fixed for four. I have all my work finished before my lunch. So—"

"I see." He was clearly not going to tell her any more, Margaret decided. She got to her feet and in silence walked with him across the lawn and into the house.

Louise was in the hall as they reached it. She acknowledged Boris's polite bow politely.

"I make the tea, Mrs. Brentwood?" she asked.

"I thought you were going out this afternoon?" Margaret said, coldly, staring at her.

"I have just come back. I make the tea?"

"Not just yet, thank you. Mr. Sudenic has to go now. I will have my tea at four – indoors, today. It is too hot, outside."

She could not bear to go back to the garden retreat, alone.

"Yes, Mrs. Brentwood."

Boris walked to the end of the road and got on a bus. He arrived in the City half an hour later and was shown into the offices of P. H. and W. T. Phillimore, solicitors. Stephen was already there alone in the waiting-room. Boris was a trifle uneasy and showed it.

"It's all right," Stephen said. "Very natural for you to see your solicitor about your affairs. And after all, Bill is Ann's brother and he's handled them since you arrived in England, hasn't he?"

"That is true. But this matter—"

"Has nothing to do with Bill. It seemed a good opportunity to see you and hand it over. My leave is up tonight."

Stephen dipped into a brief-case he carried and taking out a revolver handed it to Boris.

"I take pride in the fact that it's just as good as new. As good as it was when you gave it to me before you left the country in 1939."

"Oh, Stephen!"

"I was tremendously proud of it at that time," Stephen said, gruffly. "Of course I was under age to have such a thing. When I got into the Navy later I simply kept it in my kit. Lucky to avoid getting it pinched, I suppose. After the war I licensed it and have kept that up."

"It is licensed in your name?"

"That's right."

"It cannot be helped. I may keep it for now?"

"For good, as far as I'm concerned. I told you I'd still got it because I thought, if the Commies are after you for escaping, as they may well be, it might come in useful."

"A thousand thanks. You are a good boy, Stephen. A good friend."

"Got anything on tonight?" Stephen asked, feeling that the interview was again taking too emotional a turn. "Care to have a meal with me before I go off to Portsmouth?"

"You are very kind. Another time. I have already a date."

"Another time, then. Only I shan't have any long leaves for a bit. Might slip up for the day, though."

Boris put the gun into the shoulder holster he had already put on that morning in preparation for this event. His immaculate suit was not distorted by the new article of underwear. A few

minutes later he was summoned to his solicitor's room and with Stephen assisting in the matter of English technical terms, completed his legal business. Afterwards, leaving Stephen with Bill Phillimore, he walked out into the street with feelings of deep gratitude and comfort.

By accident he had dropped a useful knife into Higlett Bay just before he reached the shore. For the last four months, though he had replaced the knife, he had been less than fully armed, not daring to approach an unorthodox source, certainly not a respectable gunsmith. As for his other contacts, he had dealt with some and ignored others, but always keeping his personal provision to himself.

Now the defect was remedied. An old-fashioned piece, perhaps, but useful. Loaded, too. Stephen had thought of everything. Ammo was always available, he had said, for the asking.

Walking down to the Embankment, Boris proceeded slowly along it, sitting down, at last, near Cleopatra's Needle to watch the river and the busy crowds of the rush hour. The hard object in his left armpit gave him a sense of security he had missed for many years, for nearly half his life, he counted, wondering.

Chapter Five

The evening sun was still shining on the water at the far bank when Boris got up and walked away. During his long rest on the Embankment bench he had not read a newspaper nor smoked a cigarette. He had just sat and stared at the river, quite heedless of those who passed or of those who came to sit beside him for a few impatient minutes before jumping up and hurrying away.

Boris had learned the futility of haste, that exposure of bad timing. He had been forced by circumstances to scrape his life clean of everything but the bare essentials of existence. He was prepared, moreover, to accept a varying quality in these things, from a minimum just consistent with upholding life to a reasonable, if precarious, degree of comfort and at times, as now, to a temporary opulence.

He made no future plans as he sat there. Planning in advance, mapping out a future progression, were habits of behaviour, like haste, that he had long ago given up. Not that he allowed himself to drift into totally unprepared actions, unforeseen situations. On the contrary. His quick, practical mind was always at work on his surroundings and the possibilities of advantage that they offered. This, in his unending battle with circumstance, had become automatic. When he saw an advantage he never failed to secure it. When, after close inspection, it seemed to offer little, he let it go. Without regret or self-blame. He understood his own fallibility. That was another lesson he had learned over the bitter years.

When he decided to move he followed the Embankment to Charing Cross Underground station and from there walked up to the Strand and past St. Martin's church into Leicester Square and beyond. The rush hour was slackening, but a crowd still poured towards the railway station and Boris felt that he was the only one walking against the tide, the sole eccentric, the lone rebel, the outcast. As he stood under the characterless representation of a national martyr, flanked by her very bas-relief lion, waiting to brave alone the privileged crossing that the traffic consistently ignored, he began to laugh inwardly at his thoughts.

It all came, he decided, of accepting this invitation to dine with compatriots.

The interior of Kettner's was warm, well-lighted, full of cheerful noise, preponderantly male. He hesitated just inside the entrance but was not overlooked for more than three seconds.

"Mr. Orloff's party? Yes, sir. Upstairs."

It was to be in a private room, then, he thought, pleased to remember he was wearing his new suit. They must have funds, the free Poles. Or very good jobs. Both, decidedly. He gave his name at the door of a room near the head of the stairs. The waiter who had brought him up flung open the door and announced him. Nine heads turned from a bar in the far corner of the room.

Boris stepped forward, giving a quick look round him as he did so. Clearly this was an ante-chamber to the private dining-room, half seen through an open connecting door.

One of the nine moved to meet him, at the same time saying to the waiter, "You may serve now. We are all here." The waiter acknowledged the order and disappeared.

"Count Sudenic. We are delighted. We apologize for being so long unaware of your arrival in this country."

Boris murmured suitably. He found himself taken by the arm and drawn gently farther into the room. Introductions followed, a drink was pressed into his hand. He repeated his usual condensed account of his escape and landing in Yorkshire. There were the usual grunts and exclamations of astonishment, pity, approval. Boris sipped his drink, waiting for the inevitable.

It came from an elderly, hawk-faced individual, whose bearing was in itself a sufficient uniform.

"We have been wondering why you have been here so long without getting into touch with us. Modesty? Embarrassment? Surely not. You an Army man – with your record?"

The merest trace of a break in the last sentence held Boris's attention. An afterthought? Then why? Did they not hold his record? Of course they did. This man had been a general. He had, to Boris's knowledge, made up all possible records of the Polish army, man by man, that he could glean from saved files, individual recollection, Red Cross endeavour and so on. There had been perhaps six men in his prison group who were released by Stalin to fight with the Allies. He mentioned their names

now, not at first answering the general's question.

"You must have heard from them. They were in my lot in Siberia."

"We heard from one of them, only," the general said, grimly. "The rest died, on the way out to Egypt or from disease or in North Africa."

"They were six out of thirty," Boris said in the same tone. "As far as I know I and one other are the only survivors left."

The arrival of waiters in the dining-room next door halted this exchange. Boris foresaw that he could get out of answering the general's question at present, but saw too that he would not be forgiven for doing so. As the assembled party began to move towards the clink of dishes and cutlery he said, raising his voice a little, "I had the good luck or perhaps the misfortune to be adopted on my arrival, by an English family. It so happens I had English friends who had not forgotten me."

There was some laughter at this, a few exchanged glances. The general, however, was not amused. His back, a few paces ahead of Boris, stiffened slightly. Let us hope it will not break when he sits down, Boris thought, laughing inwardly. Aloud he went on, in a serious voice, "I wanted to find work first. Not to appear to ask for – charity."

It was lame, but no one could with politeness reject it. Looking round the group as they took their places, Boris even wondered if he had been less than tactful. Apart from the general and an old gentleman with a white beard, neatly trimmed, he saw that he was the best-dressed man present. Orloff, who seemed to be acting chairman on this occasion, wore a very old-fashioned dinner-jacket, while one or two of the distinguished company were very shabby and even not altogether clean. Boris rebuked himself for criticizing hands probably used in manual work. He thought of his own past activities and nearly swore aloud at himself. His present life must be corrupting him.

"You don't remember me then, Boris?" asked the white-haired old gentleman.

He had come up silently behind the new-comer as he stood waiting for direction. When Orloff handed Boris to a seat beside himself, this man sat down on his other side.

"You don't know who I am?" he repeated.

“No,” Boris said. “Should I remember?”

“Not even my name? You heard it just now.”

“It was bewildering, when I came in. So many names. Polish names. I was overwhelmed.”

“I will repeat it. Sczliekowicz. Now do you remember?”

Boris stared, a painful flush spreading slowly over his whole face.

“You were my father’s friend,” he said and bowed his head before all that might follow.

Nothing followed. Or nothing painful. Nothing accusatory. The old man even reached out a hand to pat his shoulder.

“We will speak later,” he said, gently.

The meal, a very good meal, took its course. Coffee and liqueurs followed. The chairman made a few announcements. For the enlightenment of their guest, he went on, he would describe the constitution of their society, its close links with and distinction from, the political body representing a government in exile. Having thus drawn Boris into his remarks he turned to him and said, “You will not deny us the pleasure of hearing some account of your experiences since the end of the war. We know of your captivity and can imagine it. We have had many accounts of the life in Siberia. It is afterwards. Unless you would find it too painful.”

Too familiar, too often repeated, to rouse feelings any longer. Too far away now. He told them, in words he had already used to the police in Yorkshire, to the authorities in London, to the Brentwood family, the rough outlines of his experiences. There was much that he did not include, but nothing false, exaggerated or spoken for effect.

“We see clearly that he is one of us,” Orloff concluded his little speech of thanks to the speaker. There was prolonged applause.

When the party broke up Sczliekowicz was just behind Boris on the stairs. The general was just in front. Boris heard the gentle voice at his ear.

“You will want to ask me many questions,” the old man said. “You must come for a final brandy at my home.”

Boris accepted the challenge. It was the only thing he could do. They waited together for a taxi and when they got into it the general followed.

Sczliekowicz lived in an attic flat in a large, old-fashioned house between Hammersmith and Shepherd's Bush. There were a great many stairs to climb but the flat itself was comfortably furnished, suggesting that the old man was not so badly off as the neighbourhood and type of dwelling might indicate. The furniture in the sitting-room was heavy, but good. There were some well-polished silver and brass ornaments, an abundance of books lining two walls, plain dark crimson velvet curtains at the window, falling to the floor, and several well-placed, shaded wall lights, besides a reading-lamp on a wide desk and a standard lamp beside the fireplace. Through the unscreened, closed window-panes the late evening blue dusk was cut by a sharp silver crescent moon.

Sczliekowicz urged the two others to be seated, then fussed about switching on lamps, drawing the curtains, finding glasses and a decanter of brandy in a small ornate cupboard against the wall near the desk.

"For you, count," he said to Sudenic, coming close to his guest. The general, who had not yet sat down, came forward to receive a glass and then moved away with it to look at the bookshelves.

"That is the second time tonight I have been addressed by that title," Boris said, steadily, looking up. "Are you breaking certain news to me?"

"If you interpret correctly."

"My father is dead?"

"Yes."

Boris sat without moving, still looking up at the kindly face above him.

"And the others? My mother – my sisters?"

"The same."

"I have never allowed myself to hope. But I find I have always done so."

Sczliekowicz's hand went out for the second time to press the younger man's shoulder. He seemed to be very much moved, for he took away his hand a moment later to find a large handkerchief which he pressed to his face in unashamed grief.

Boris stood quite still, looking now at the floor between his feet. A flood of memories assailed him, tearing him apart, swamping his mind, stopping the questions he most wanted to

ask, nearly drowning his heart, choking his breathing, above all washing away his new-found confidence. He struggled to keep back a purely animal cry of pain. Four months free from daily fear, secure from physical punishment, had weakened him, he thought bitterly, struggling now with tears that would not be held back.

He let them fall. He gulped his brandy, drew the back of his hand across his eyes and at last looked up, still seeing in place of his father's friend, his father's own form and face, his mother's gentle questioning eyes, his younger sister's thin beauty.

"How?" he asked, in a low harsh voice. "Why? When?"

"It has not been established exactly when or how. During the upheavals of the Russo-German pact. Your estate lay on the border of the two zones. The border was disputed, naturally. Not least on the spot. The German side was occupied territory – brutal, Teutonic, uncompromising occupation. The Russians were careful and busy with their propaganda. Their political agents were everywhere with promises of land. They found willing ears among certain of your father's peasants."

"It was the Russians then? They took them—"

"No. Worse than that. Your own peasants, in your own house."

"No! No, that is too much!"

The general turned from the bookcase when he heard this cry and moved quietly forward until he could see Boris's face. He stood there, watching, while the revelations continued.

"That is the report I had, but years later, from your head groom, Vassili, I think his name was."

"Vassili was in the stables. Ivan Fedorowicz was head groom, with Voliniak. But Ivan came away with me when the war broke out. He was lost in the retreat. Where did you find Vassili?"

"In Egypt. Let me tell you, from the beginning. In the retreat – I was in the government service, you may remember – I was put in charge of certain archives, to get them out of the country. I set off with a small party. The route I planned, through Rumania to Greece and so to France, would pass near your estate. I determined to take your parents and sisters with me. I had resources and a guard of a sort. I went to the house and found them gone."

"And then?"

"There was no time to delay. The Germans behind in the west, the Russians coming in from the east. I had to travel south in the narrowing corridor between the two enemies. The two traditional enemies. Alas for Poland!"

There was a silence. Boris waited.

"Well, I got through. It took a long time. The frontiers were closed. It was a matter of bribes and bargaining and sometimes naked escape, without explanation, fortunately without trace. We reached Rumania in mid-winter and spent it among friendly peasants. The next summer France fell and our future seemed to have been swallowed up too. But we followed our plan to Greece and when the next threat came, to Egypt, to the British in Egypt. There I found more of my countrymen and among them, your Vassili."

Boris lifted a pale face.

"Go on."

"Your father had received a message to leave his house, to hide in a certain place and to wait there until he was rescued. He obeyed the instructions. Nothing happened. After a week he went back to the house. He found it was taken over by his peasants. They had broken in, destroyed, desecrated, were still enjoying a drunken orgy on stolen wine from the cellar. A Russian was in charge. All the servants left behind, except Vassili, had fled."

"They murdered my father, my mother, Anna, Nadia? Their own people murdered them?" Boris raised haunted eyes. "I sent that message," he said. "For their safety. I had been carried in the retreat far behind the line of the Russian zone. We knew nothing about the pact until three days after it was signed. We were surrounded and virtually made prisoner. But they were in a hurry, the Russians. They could not delay just then to dispose of us. We escaped massacre. I had a plan to get away from them, I and two others and my batman, Ivan. As we got nearer to my home, into country Ivan and I knew as well as our own faces, I managed his disappearance with a message to my father. That they should leave and hide and I would meet them."

"You! It was you who should have got them out? Vassili did not know that. He managed to get away after the killing."

"My father will have told no one. Not even my mother."

The old man nodded, understanding very well the desperate

secrecy needed in those appalling times.

"And then?"

"Our direction was changed. For no reason or for very good reasons. Ivan never came back. Perhaps he never delivered my message—"

"He must have done so, since they were gone the day I passed through."

"Perhaps he was killed – or captured – or turned traitor – to either enemy. We shall never know. The plan failed. I was taken into Russia. You know the rest."

"Ivan was killed with the rest of your family."

It was the general who spoke. He had been so quiet since their arrival that Boris had almost forgotten his presence. His harsh voice, stating a harsh fact, struck a sudden flush into Boris's cheek. His own voice was harder than usual as he answered, "What evidence have you for that?"

"The word of a brother officer, now dead."

Scziliekowicz, aware of the sudden tension in the room and suspicious of its cause, took refuge in the decanter.

"Let me fill your glass, general," he said, quickly interposing himself between the other two as Boris rose slowly to his feet. "Count?"

"I shall never use that title," said Boris, grief and anger mixed in his tone. "It died with my father and with the land stolen from him. I am Boris Sudenic, without any prefix, to you and to all my friends."

The general's eyes gleamed with sudden amusement, but he said nothing, turning away with his drink in his hand to sit down for the first time since he entered the flat. Scziliekowicz also sat down near Boris, who slowly followed the example of the others.

Their death-laden revelations, their sharp emotions, had exhausted all three. Now they could only sit, cut off by the long crimson velvet curtains from the happy lights and moving London crowds outside under the warm summer sky, each turning over the sad pages of a cruel history, stunned by its excessive horror, its indecisive, lamentable sequel. They saw the scenes of their childhood, the country of their love and allegiance, as it were through a coating of transparent ice, a thick, terrifying icicle of slow-dropping perpetual frost, a never-

ending winter of imprisonment.

Boris rose at last, quiet, polite, with apologies for staying so long and for being the cause of so much distress to his host.

"Not at all, my dear Boris," Sczilieko wicz assured him. "I hope to see more of you. Much more. We cannot expect any immediate change – you understand me – but any up-to-date detail from behind the Curtain – I am in a position to pass on – If you understand me?"

"I will do my best," said Boris, gravely.

The old man showed him out, but did not go downstairs with him to the door of the house. He watched from his top landing until he saw Boris reach the hall at the foot of the stairs. Then he went inside and closed and chained the door of his flat.

"Well?" he said to the general. "He is indeed the son of my old friend."

The general said, "Yes. 'I am Boris Sudenic,' he said, 'to you and all of my friends.' He has other names, you know. Or perhaps you don't know that."

"He spoke freely."

"But we have learned nothing. His feelings seemed to be perfectly sincere. All that he said was true. Except—"

"Except what?"

"I will bring someone else to see you. Then you will know. But Sudenic will of course deny anything unfavourable to himself."

"He is my friend's son. I think he spoke the truth to us tonight."

"He always does." The general laughed and held out his glass again. "He always does. He always has."

Chapter Six

The offices of the Baltic Trading Company took up one corridor, a quarter of the square building's fourth floor. The lift-shaft was central. The four corridors went off diagonally from it. This made the rooms leading from them a peculiar shape which charmed or maddened visitors according to their various temperaments. Some, of course, noticed nothing because they never did take any interest in their surroundings. About a third of the Baltic Trading Company's clients were like that. They dealt in wood.

The rooms in the B.T.C. corridor opened on either side of it in a staggered pattern so that secretaries and messengers rushing out on an errand could not collide with one another. All the first six rooms had half-glassed walls on to the corridor, but those farther along, where the higher executives worked, and the two rooms of the managing director's working suite at the very end, had plain surfaces of enamelled paint. In the sharp angle of the two outer walls where they met at one corner of the building a large pseudo-classical urn in concrete sustained a very large arrangement of leafy branches and heavy flowers, spot-lit from below and at the sides. This arrangement, taken with the fact that the wood-tiled surface of the first part of the corridor here gave place to a thick, grey carpet, never failed to impress the casual visitor or the new-comer, though regular customers, as also the managing director himself, had long ago ceased to be aware of it. The flowers were renewed by contract with a local florist and watered, except at week-ends, by the managing director's principal secretary, who also looked after the smaller, scented flowers on his desk.

A few days after Boris's dinner-party with the free Poles he found himself engaged upon a particularly heavy trayful of letters for translation. Most of them were in German or French, one or two in Norwegian, which he laid on one side. It was not one of his five languages. Two were in Polish. These he also laid aside. When he eventually took them up he spent considerably more time over them than he had done over all the others.

Margrethe Olsen, the secretary, came into his small room a few minutes before the lunch break. Boris was leaning back in his chair staring at a calendar on the wall.

"All ready for you," he said, without turning.

She saw that he was looking at her in the glass of a small mirror that hung above the calendar. She smiled and he smiled back.

"I can never catch you out," she said, in a low voice, "however quietly I open your door."

"My hearing is good," he answered, quite seriously, "and I have had much practice."

"Yes, I suppose so."

Margrethe's fair skin flushed a little, for his eyes in the mirror were still resting on her, with quite undisguised approval.

"You should always make your coiffure so," he said. "Straight and smooth with the long end twist on top."

"Twisted on top."

"Twist-ed. What a language! Few rules of grammar but those – absurd."

"I agree, but one must observe the rules."

She moved forward and Boris swivelled his chair to meet her, turning slowly back as she reached the desk. She stood there, waiting, but noticing all the same the groups into which he had divided the mail.

"These," he offered her, "are for Sørensen direct. His translated copy is on top of each letter as usual. These," he handed her the Norwegian letters, "I cannot do. I wonder you sent them to me."

They exchanged a long look, questioning on her part, closed on his.

"I do not understand – Norwegian," he repeated, softly.

"Very well."

With a slight frown Margrethe picked up the letters.

"But you do," Boris went on, in the same tone.

Her flush deepened, but she only said, "Very well," again and turned to go.

"Stop," said Boris, still in his gentle voice, bantering, amused. "There are these."

He showed her the two Polish letters but kept them in his hand as he did so and almost at once transferred them back to

the desk, where he laid one arm across them.

"I will take them in to Sørensen myself," he said. "Will you have lunch with me?"

"Today?"

"Naturally, today."

"Very well."

He smiled at her. The businesslike tone was natural, he knew. Admirable girl, with her gentle young face and smooth primrose hair and cold blue eyes. How unlike Louise. How fortunate.

"Where?"

"Aldwych this time. No, beyond. A little place – not bad."

She listened carefully as he described it and made a mental note of the name. They had never lunched together in the same place more than once. It astonished her that he had found so many small ordinary restaurants within half a mile of the office. Before he joined the Baltic Trading Company she had usually eaten a sandwich and drunk coffee at the nearest snack bar. She did so still on most days. But about once a week now she met Boris for a more substantial meal.

On this occasion he was already there when she arrived, sitting at a corner table reading the early edition of an evening paper. He did not look up until she arrived but he had pulled out a chair for her before she was quite ready to sit down.

"You will not find it too hot in here?" he asked, anxiously.

Margrethe laughed. She was wearing a sleeveless pale coral-pink linen dress and white high-heeled sandals. She had walked from the office on the shady side of the road and had not hurried.

"Poor you!" she said, laughing. "The business man's suit. Always this cloth, summer and winter. The British are the true masochists."

"We stay here, then?"

"Why, yes. There is no time for moving. And I am hungry."

Her blue eyes had warmed to the thought of food. The Swedes had Teutonic affinities, Boris thought, noticing it. But thinking too that her good appetite did not spoil her excellent figure. Let her eat then. It was good for the nerves and she needed strong nerves.

He ordered for them both and talked easily and lightly to her about a recent week-end he had spent in a charming little hotel

on the River Thames between Maidenhead and Henley.

"Alone?" asked Margrethe, primly.

"Naturally not alone," he answered.

"Is she English?"

"No."

"But I thought your friends—"

"My friends are friends of the past. My – companion by the river is of the present."

Margrethe looked annoyed.

"I do not understand these riddles," she said, crossly.

"You do not need to understand."

She laid down her knife and fork.

"Perhaps it is too hot in here after all."

Boris's hand went out to cover hers.

"The temperature will go down if we cease to discuss my private affairs."

There was a mild emphasis on the word 'private' that made the girl look up at him with a new light in her eyes. Her hand lay still under his and when, a moment later, he took it away she slowly closed her fingers and removed her own hand to her lap where she fumbled with her handbag and eventually produced a handkerchief with which she blew her nose and dabbed her eyes. To anyone who had happened to watch this little scene a lovers' quarrel had flared and had as quickly died away.

"So," she said, attacking her meal again. "From the last two letters of this morning?"

"Perhaps."

"I must know the source."

He looked at her thoughtfully. This was a fresh development. The messenger had woken up, showed signs of giving trouble. It was always the same. Ideals, patriotic fervour, invariably dimmed with the first payments, when money shone brighter than those other aims had ever done.

"Why must you? You are the messenger. It is safer that way."

"I am not speaking for myself. It is from higher up. I suppose they begin to doubt."

He frowned. The information, though not of the first importance, had always been useful and patently accurate. Then why doubt?

“I cannot give my source to the messenger.”

She sighed. She had been told to expect this reaction. What a bore. Boris was altogether disappointing. He had charm, he had looks, he admired her – but from a distance he alone chose to maintain. That week-end on the river. Some slut he’d picked up. Not even one of his English friends and acquaintances. An unknown – always to remain unknown – without a name she could abuse—

“Very well,” she said, carelessly. “As you will. I will arrange a meeting. But not in private, that would be too dangerous for them.”

“How then?”

“There is an international club I attend. Students, *au pair* girls, refugees. Many Africans and Eastern races. They belong to the British Commonwealth, but they find the European aliens more better to talk with, more kind.”

“It sounds terrible,” said Boris simply, with feeling.

“It is not terrible. It is jolly and perhaps sad. Everyone is happy to meet.”

“Terrible,” Boris repeated.

“I can manage that you meet – a personage – at one of our parties. To him you can give your source as you would to –” she lowered her voice and spoke in Swedish, “to the Embassy itself.”

Boris nodded. He understood this much, though he could not have held a conversation with her in her own tongue. Soon after they were supplied with coffee and finished their meal discussing tennis. Margrethe was enthusiastic about the game. She played every evening at the local suburban club, she said. Actually it was the club-house that the internationalists borrowed for their weekly meetings. These had to be held late in the evenings at present because play went on so long with summer time. In the winter the meetings had begun at six.

“So you will come tomorrow, yes?”

“Tomorrow, is it?”

“Any objection?”

He made a play of looking at his diary where he knew the page was blank. Finally he agreed to keep the date, but he did not write it down, nor the address.

“I shall not forget,” he said. Margrethe nodded. She had expected more opposition, if not an adamant refusal. His puny

reluctance worried her. There must be something behind it, but she could not begin to think what that might be.

"We dress for this – party?" Boris asked, when they met outside Mr. Sørensen's room, after making their separate ways back to the office.

"No, no. Anything you like. Informal. Some of the students have a very strange appearance. National costume. Then there is a Spanish group. They wear black, all black and they are very dark, black hair, black eyes and they play on guitars and sing in a harsh voice."

"Holy Mother of God!" said Boris, startled into a return to his devout youth.

The collection of mixed races at the tennis club house was not, however, intimidating, Boris decided, not even very exciting. He followed Margrethe about, being introduced to fellow humans of many different colours, builds, clothing and degrees of animation. The only language he heard was English.

For about an hour he chatted easily with a mixed group of Africans and Asiatics, during which time he noticed that Margrethe drifted away from him to a circle of her own compatriots. But when a murmur went round that the buffet had begun to operate, she appeared again at his side and he found himself eating a sagging sausage roll and drinking very weak coffee in a group exclusively Scandinavian. It was clear to him that the object of the exercise was near at end.

It was managed naturally, so smoothly that he discovered a new reason to admire his primrose-haired colleague. The man beside whom he had been standing for quite a quarter of an hour said, in answer to some casual remark about suburban tennis clubs, "But they are not only social meeting-places. The game is serious. There are even Olympic players who begin here."

He turned, on an apparently sudden impulse, to Boris.

"I will show you one of the famous in her extreme youth. You like to see? Then come!" There was not even a hint of command in the voice.

Boris followed and they walked through a side door into a small room with a large table at the centre, set round with chairs. The committee room, he saw at once. On its walls were hung groups of players going back to the years immediately

after the Second World War. There were only two individual portraits: one of the robust, eminently successful-looking business-man and local councillor who had presented the club rooms to the club; the other of the famous woman player who had been nurtured there.

Boris went back to the door and pushed it wide open before rejoining his new acquaintance. They stood side by side admiring the player's stalwart build, her pleasant extroverted smile.

"You have given Margrethe some interesting facts," the man said, not altering the tone of his voice but speaking now in German. "Where do you get them from and what do you expect us to pay you for them?"

Boris frowned. The man was crude. After such a pleasant discreet approach his questions grated. This surprised Boris.

"Who are *you*, my friend?" Boris asked, mildly, also in German. "Forgive me for asking, but Margrethe has given me to understand that formalities are now necessary."

"How can I satisfy you if you refuse to satisfy us?"

Boris sighed.

"A difficult position indeed. But let me remind you of certain information I supplied that you have now proved to be correct."

The man nodded and Boris said, "And again—"

He went on with his list. The other listened, unwilling at first, then with reluctant agreement.

"So" said Boris, finally, "my source must be a good one. You agree?"

"For me," said the man, "it is altogether too good. But my masters are greedy men and will not take my advice. Will a bonus, as if from Sørensen's firm, satisfy you?"

He named an amount. Boris shook his head.

"Too much," he said. "I have not worked there long enough."

He mentioned a sum less than half what he had been offered. The other looked at him curiously.

"You are totally unpredictable," he said. "So different from our expectations, based on our own people—"

"That you wonder if I am really the Sudenic you were led to believe in. If you will look in the picture of the tennis champion you will see on the veranda behind us two types who have no doubts about me and are very curious to know why you are with

me.''

His Swedish companion was both startled and angry, but did not betray it. He merely asked who they were.

"My own countrymen,'' Boris answered. "Would you like to meet them?''

"I see I shall have to do so.''

Boris led him on to the veranda, turning off the light in the committee room as he did so.

"Good evening, General Constantin,'' he said, cordially. "So you, too, are internationally minded?''

The general did not look pleased, but he introduced the man who was with him and Boris invented a Swedish name for his own companion, who had not been named to him individually before. Margrethe had merely waved a hand round the group of Scandinavians, remarking, "My friends,'' and he himself had put his feet together and bowed and said, "Sudenic.''

"Meissner,'' the Swede corrected. Boris apologized.

"There was something of interest in there?'' asked Constantin with heavy innuendo.

"Why, yes,'' Boris answered. "The member of this club who became an Olympic Champion. Shall I show you?''

He moved back to the door of the committee room and switched on the light.

"You must excuse me,'' said Meissner, stiffly. "I must rejoin my friends. I have to drive them home.''

"Tell Margrethe I shall not be long,'' Boris said, with a smile.

He led the general and the latter's friend to the picture.

"Since when have you become intimate with the Swedish colony?'' asked the general, severely.

"I work at Sørensen's. His secretary, Miss Olsen, brought me here. She said I should become more international. I thought if I am to become British I should meet the Commonwealth. It is my first visit.''

"Meissner is a high-ranking official.''

"Really!'' Boris's exclamation held quite spontaneous surprise. He had not been deeply impressed by his vetting.

The general was not a stupid man. For that reason he found Boris's genuine ignorance exasperating.

"You should be more careful!'' he said, roughly. He knew his voice was blustering, regretted it, resented regretting it and

growled angrily, “Why, man, you’re not even naturalized yet!”

“No,” said Boris. He looked squarely at the general. “My permit holds good for six months,” he said. “I have already used four of them.”

There was a sudden stillness in the room. The general’s companion had not uttered a word so far. Now he spoke.

“You will, of course, get it renewed?”

Boris laughed.

“Who would want to stop me?” he said. Before either of the others could find an answer to this they heard the sound of dance music strike up in the main club room.

“A waltz,” said Boris, gaily. “Now that is one dance I can manage.

It does not dislocate the spine or the hips. I must find Miss Olsen. Good night, gentlemen.”

General Constantin and his friend turned off the light in the committee room, walked down the veranda steps to the gravel path and, making their way round the club house, got into the general’s car and drove away. It had not been a particularly rewarding expedition. In fact the general had an uncomfortable feeling that he had made a considerable fool of himself. This did not improve his report to his friends on Boris Sudenic’s habits and probable activities.

Chapter Seven

Two days later Boris again paid an afternoon call at the Brentwoods' house in Fawcett Street. This time he arrived a little before three and not by arrangement.

Louise was out at her English class and Mrs. Ogden was out shopping. The door was opened by Ogden in his shirt-sleeves, not very cordial in his greeting, for he had been reading the newspaper with his feet up, not expecting any callers until after his master's return, which he had been warned would take place at three-thirty. In fact Boris might have had no reply to his repeated ringing of the bell had not Ogden lowered his feet, moved to the area window and peered up at the unwanted interrupter of his rest. When he saw who it was and that the visitor was smiling down at him, he retreated swiftly and went upstairs while Boris, who would have been quite content to enter by the back door, waited with as much patience as he could command.

"Is Mr. Colin expecting you, sir?" Ogden asked, when he had allowed the visitor into the hall. He was puzzled by the apparently changed order of the time-table.

"No. No one is expecting me. That is, Mrs. Brentwood has kindly given me what I think you call an open invitation and having to pass this way I stopped in case I should find one of them at home."

"Mr. Colin will be back at the half-hour," Ogden told him. "I was to expect him. He has an appointment here, he said."

"I see. And Mrs. Brentwood?"

"Is in the garden, sir. If you will come this way."

The old man began to move off towards the drawing-room door.

Boris said gently, "Do not disturb yourself, Ogden. I know my way."

"Yes, sir."

Ogden did, however, open the drawing-room door and though he went no farther, he waited until he saw Boris move down the iron steps into the garden before he turned away to resume his

interrupted read and smoke.

Margaret, having no particular errand or engagement for that afternoon had decided to get even with her correspondence. She took the formidable back-log of letters, petty bills, invitations, circulars and picture postcards from travelling friends to her usual retreat behind the rose fence and spread it all out on the day-bed. But the afternoon was a particularly sultry one, with a hot yellow sky overhead, no sun and no wind, not even a gentle breeze to stir the drooping dusty leaves of the trees or bring her the scent of roses to improve the heavy air. Where there was no sun there was no shade, no demarcation line to give her satisfaction and the make-believe of escape from burning rays. There was merely a slight darkening, a heavier oppression, an increased irritation of flies. She stared at her papers for a long time before she was able to rouse herself at all. She had finished only one letter and begun another when Boris walked round the corner of the screen.

At once she felt the air lighten, the day become endurable.

"You of all people," she said, when they had exchanged a brief greeting. "I had no idea."

"Nor had I," said Boris, taking out his handkerchief to wipe his face. "But I am sent to Kensington and I lose my way so I think I will ask you and perhaps rest to become cool, if that is possible."

"Of course it is," she said, with emphasis. "You like a deck-chair, don't you?" She began to get up, pushing her heap of papers to one side. "Will you have something cold to drink?"

"No. No, thank you," he said, quickly, stopping her. "Too hot to move. I will sit here, if I may."

She pushed her letters still farther along the day-bed and he sat down near her, noticing her increased pleasure with rueful acceptance.

"You will direct me first, please," he said, to counteract any unfortunate impression he might have made. "So that I do not forget and go away as ignorant as I came."

They both laughed. He stated his supposed difficulty and had a lucid, admirably brief answer to it. This was more like the old Margaret, intelligent, well-informed, lively; not the sad dreamer who had so often embarrassed him since his return. He began to feel relaxed, confidential.

“You do not object if I continue to cool off for a little?”

“As long as you like. Colin will be at home presently. He would like to see you, I’m sure.”

Doubtful, thought Boris, but she has to say that, though she does not believe it. To avoid any discussion of Colin’s attitude, of Colin’s views, which could lead so dangerously into her past, he plunged into his own memories.

He had found, to his great relief and joy, that much of their bitterness had drained away from them. As after a surgical operation, he remembered the sequence of events, but the accompanying pain had vanished and with it the terror caused by the pain.

“This day is like many in the high summer when I was in forced labour at the mines. But then I was working. The sweat dried as we worked. There was only thirst. Bad thirst and no water. No relief till the end of the day when the sun went down.”

“You were not working underground, then?”

“No. I was not a miner. Not skilled. I was above. We build new sheds, new offices. We make roads. All heavy, unskilled labour.”

“Was this in Siberia? I didn’t know it was as hot as that so far north.”

“No. In the Ural Mountains. Central Russia. One of those Russian colonial states they took in the last century when you British were doing the same in India and other places of the east.”

“This was after you had been released from Siberia, then?”

She did not want to lose the personal thread in a discussion of comparative empires, however contemporary.

“Yes. When my hope of being allowed to join the Army had gone for ever. When it was impossible, because the steppe is endless, to escape to the south and find a way to Egypt.”

“You could live without hope?”

She was staring at him with great compassion but also with immense surprise. She is still the complete romantic, he thought, smiling at her tenderly.

For a brief moment, seeing the smile, feeling it pierce her heart, Margaret renewed her youth. His next words shattered her dream quite finally.

"I was without hope," he said, "but not alone. I had my wife."

"Your wife!"

Margaret heard her own cry and was profoundly shocked by it. But Boris did not seem to have noticed anything unusual. She sat, white-faced, shaking, feeling the uncontrolled tears begin to run unchecked down to the corners of her mouth, but listening against her will as he went on talking about his marriage. As she listened she began to feel that she had never known him at all, that everything he had seemed to be had lived only in her own mind, that she had put on to a stranger a costume of her own making in which he had been content to play the part of prince to her own childish princess. But had he really been content? He had left her in the end. When the war was upon them he had pulled off that play-acting costume and gone away. To forget her as if she had never existed. To marry this woman – this—

"Was she a Russian?" she asked, when she felt she had enough control of her voice.

Boris checked himself in surprise.

"But no," he said. "It would not be possible to me to marry a Russian. She was from the Ukraine, of Hungarian descent, I think. They are not Russians in the Ukraine. It is another colony."

"I see. Was she a prisoner, too?"

"In a way. Her father and mother had been deported to forced labour. She was a child, then. It was a concession that she lived with them, but the father had not committed any political crime. She was just lucky. I was lucky too that they allowed me to marry.

But it was so far from Moscow. And they are not all monsters. The system is frightful but not all of those who work it."

"How long ago was this?"

He did not answer immediately, but seemed to be considering. Could he have forgotten the year of his marriage, she wondered? Or was the whole tale a fable, invented to build a wall of discretion, of convention, between them? When he answered she understood how very far from the truth she had wandered. She was ready to believe anything thereafter.

"My son, if he lives, will be ten years old next month. My two

daughters nine and seven."

"Children! You have children?"

"Yes. I had three children."

"Had?"

It needed this final shock to drag her from herself and release her true compassion.

"Oh, Boris, how terrible for you to have to leave them all behind! It happens too often in these escapes and we hardly take it in. What it means – the separation – the suffering. Will they be allowed to join you? Are they safe, even?"

Boris looked at her steadily with a small bitter smile lifting the corners of his mouth.

"How different is the life in this country! You do not understand. You could not imagine. But how can you when I have not told you."

"They aren't – dead!" She spoke hardly above a whisper.

"I do not know."

Though the face before her was calm she could not bear to look at the pain in his eyes, so she turned her own to the ground and sat very still.

"When Stalin died," Boris began presently, almost as if he were reading aloud to her from a familiar book, "the labour camps were re-organized. It was discovered that my wife's parents, far from being enemies of the State, were most valuable citizens, since her father had been eminent in his profession and eminent professional men of experience are still rare. It was decided that I too might be more usefully employed, so we were transferred to Leningrad and given two whole rooms to live in."

"Seven of you?" Margaret could not help exclaiming.

"It was generous. The baby was only two months old at that time."

"Yes. I suppose so."

"At the camp," Boris went on, "we had been very isolated. Not many people to make friends. All very careful to say nothing. And my wife had been there since she was a child, you will remember. But in Leningrad – how different! No one to ask where we came from or why. Those questions one does not ask. But the people friendly – all working together – no more terror or not so much. My wife was – enchanted – flattered—Well, in six months she took a lover. He was the boss where she worked.

Not so young as me, but he had privileges, he could make presents, give meals at the best restaurants. There was nothing I could do – an alien – *bourgeois* – with my history.''

"How appalling!''

Margaret spoke sincerely enough and felt a true pity, but Boris, who had turned away his head while he described his wife's unfaithfulness, turned sharply back to stare at her.

"It was not that which appals,'' he said, slowly, "but my stupidity.''

"How?''

"I kept my knowledge from her a long time. In the end it was little Alexei who gave her away to me, innocently – in her presence. Nothing could then destroy my knowledge or conceal it, nor her knowledge of my knowing. I could have stopped Alexei, taken him out, turned his attention. I did not. I sat and listened. Perhaps I was tired of my own deception more than of hers. I sat there and saw all that I had built with so much work and pain and grief melting away.''

"Did you get rid of her – divorce her? Do they have divorce?''

Boris laughed, a hideous laugh that made Margaret want to cover her ears.

"No, I did not divorce. She and her lover held the cards. I had none. It is simple in those circumstances. They had only to denounce me.''

"No! Oh, no!''

"Oh, yes.''

Boris was on his feet now, walking up and down the narrow strip of grass under the trees, talking passionately, incoherently, using words from any language that occurred to him, but never raising his voice nor using any violent gesture. His fury of despair burst from him like a flood hemmed into a narrow gorge by high rock walls, the walls of his prison discipline, his senseless, brutal years of conditioning. Margaret was too frightened to move and totally powerless to help.

But his outburst ended as abruptly as it began. He dropped down again on the day-bed beside her, took his handkerchief to his streaming face and said, shakily, "You must forgive me, Margaret. That is not usual for me.''

"Oh, my dear,'' she said, beginning to cry. "If there was anything any of us here could do!''

She laid a hand on his knee and he took it and lifted it to his lips.

"You have listened to me without trying to stop me or screaming for help," he said, smiling. "That is one of the advantages of being British."

She tried to smile back.

"Now you know and I am glad you know," he went on. "I speak of it to no one else. You, too, please."

"I won't tell anyone. No one at all."

"Except Colin?" His eyes were on her, smiling too. She felt herself flushing.

"No. Not Colin. I never repeat—" She was going to say 'gossip' but checked, horrified at herself. "I never repeat other people's confidences," she ended, awkwardly.

Boris looked away but said no more. After a short silence Margaret, whose curiosity had been growing steadily, asked, not without trepidation, "What happened to you, then?"

"Siberia – the second time. But for one year only."

"They let you go?"

"They let me go."

His answer was final. It was impossible to ask why they had let him go.

"And then?"

"I returned to Leningrad. My wife had gone and my children. My wife's parents had gone. My wife's boss had been transferred to Moscow. Perhaps they had gone with him – perhaps not. I do not know. I shall never know."

"Haven't you tried to find them?"

He glanced at her quickly and away again.

"That was not possible for me. I had become a seaman."

"Why?"

"Leningrad is a port. It was a job. It meant travel. I was a little tired of the so great Soviet Union. I preferred the sea, which is after all greater still."

It was not an answer, but again she could not demand one. Everything he had told her confirmed accounts she had read from time to time and which until now had been totally unreal. Which made this conversation too immediate, far too frightening.

"One reads about everything you've told me," she said, "but

it's very difficult for us in England to understand a system where common justice and the rights of the individual—"

He interrupted her.

"You are making a mistake," he said. "My marriage was not killed by a system of government but by an act of human nature."

"But denouncing you!"

"A woman who wants freedom and a new man uses the weapon at her hand," he answered. "Is it not so here? She makes her husband the guilty one, or so I am told. She blackmails him? She takes his children?"

"Not always. Anyway it's worse to use a kind of law that is merely oppression. We have no Siberia for innocent people to suffer and die in."

"You have no Siberia," Boris agreed, gravely, "but you have a great many divorces."

He looked at his watch, felt for his tie to straighten it, got to his feet, pulled down his jacket and moving near to the wattle hedge looked casually over it.

"The old lady is at her post," he said. "She was not there when I arrived. Now she will be very interested to see me."

"Must you go?"

"I must go. Will you come with me to the house?"

Chapter Eight

The first thing Colin saw that morning when he sat down at his desk was a note from the head of his department asking to see him before he settled to his work for the day.

This was annoying, Colin thought, and surely unnecessary. He had been briefed carefully and at considerable length for his personal interview with old Sczliekowicz, due to take place in his own study in Fawcett Street. What else could Masterson possibly have to say about it? Or was there some hitch, or even some other mission cooking for him? This was unlikely. Masterson, so thorough, so unendingly conscientious, was as careful not to overfill his subordinates' plates as he was to make certain that they both ate and digested the maximum feed he was able to provide.

Without finding any answer to allay his peevish reluctance, Colin spoke to his secretary so that she would understand his temporary absence and then made his way as quickly as possible to Masterson's room, feeling depressed and nervous.

That unpleasantly close, sticky day of low cloud and high temperature had started ominously. Everyone had arrived exhausted with travel in the airless heat, full of foreboding about the thunderstorm that must inevitably follow. In fact it was cooler inside the building than out, but that did not revive the spirits of the drooping personnel. Looking through Masterson's windows at the motionless trees in the Mall and the very few slow-moving tourists making their way towards Buckingham Palace, Colin allowed himself to drift off into a kind of stupor, only to be recalled suddenly, brutally and with a sinking heart to reality as a knock on the door brought Masterson's head up from the paper he was reading after his brief acknowledgement of Colin's presence. John Carfax slipped into the room, went over to stand behind the man at the desk and half-turned away, to stare in his turn out of the window.

"You wanted to see me, sir?" Colin asked, when nothing further happened.

At the sound of his voice Carfax turned his head round again.

"Hullo, Colin," he said, with pleasure in his voice. "Ages since I've seen you."

"Yes, Brentwood," said Masterson stiffly. "I want to see you."

Colin shot an angry glance at his old school friend, rebuking him silently for interrupting his boss in his slow approach to the point of his own presence there. Carfax, still behind Masterson's back, grinned his derisive understanding. But when Masterson turned his head to look at him Carfax presented a serious, even deferential appearance.

"Know each other?" Masterson asked, sharply.

"At school, sir," said Carfax smoothly, not offering any further enlightenment. This meagre information irritated the older man, but he could not very well ask for details so irrelevant to his present purpose. He made a mental note to investigate the matter at lunch-time. Why had no one told him there was this connection between the two? Was it wise to have them on the job in hand together?

Suppressing the minor worry, Masterson put his elbows on his desk and his finger-tips together and said to Colin, "Since I saw you yesterday and made those arrangements for you to meet Mr. Scziliekowicz, M.I.5 tell me his society has reason to believe Sudenic is working for Sweden."

"The Baltic Trading Company, sir. Swedish exporters, London office off Kingsway. He landed the job for himself, as I think I told you yesterday."

"Yes, yes, you told me yesterday. So did Scziliekowicz. When I said working for Sweden naturally I meant spying for Sweden."

"I see, sir. Mr. Scziliekowicz knows this, does he?"

"He has reason to suspect it."

"We've been pretty sure of it for a long time," said Carfax quietly.

This was too much for Colin.

"Damn you, John, you might have told me!" he burst out and immediately apologized.

"Perhaps you were not aware that Carfax is in M.I.5?" suggested Masterson with malice.

"I did know, sir. It was he I first contacted from Higlett when Sudenic came ashore there to my – to my house."

"Was it indeed?"

Masterson looked from one to the other but could make

nothing of their closed faces.

"Be that as it may," he said, using a favourite phrase that always allowed him to skid past a difficulty, "we shall expect to find that the free Poles are losing interest in the improbable Mr. Sudenic. I understand their initial concern was—"

He seemed uncertain how to go on and turning, appealed to Carfax.

"You explain it," he said. "Security is *not* my favourite subject."

"It's like this," Carfax said, coming round at last to Colin's side of the desk between them. "When Sudenic landed there were two main possibilities: (*a*) he might be a genuine refugee, (*b*) he might be a plant. As he is a Pole one would expect if (*a*) is right that he would contact free Polish organizations here. If (*b*) that he would use his connection with your family, Colin, to get himself into a position to begin spying for his masters, the Russians. The point is that he seems to have done neither. He has led a blameless, but extremely active life, first teaching languages and then using them in this Swedish firm. He has changed his address several times, but quite in keeping with his growing prosperity."

"My brother-in-law lent him some money at the start," Colin said.

Masterson intervened.

"But you did not?"

"I saw no necessity," Colin answered, stiffly. "I'd never met him before. It was the Langs, my wife's family, who knew him before the war."

"Quite," said Carfax, quickly. "The point is, Colin, Sczliekowicz wanted to find out from us how he really stood with your family. Now they think he's possibly acting for the Swedes – though how he does it they haven't a clue and no more have I. They may feel you'll resent their inquiry. We thought you ought to know that we are keeping an eye on the chap, but he isn't really our headache. I imagine his chief headache is his own."

"I don't know what you mean by that," Colin said. After a pause he added, "The papers were full of him for a few days after he landed. Didn't the Russian Embassy make any sort of protest? They usually mention provocation or enticement on

these occasions.''

Carfax laughed. Masterson said, “Nothing more than the usual formal request to speak to him. But you know that.''

“I remember, yes. Considering the trawler up-anchored and left Higlett Bay almost before he landed, certainly before we'd revived him, they couldn't very well talk about our provocation this time. They did nothing then to get him back, always supposing they knew he'd gone.''

“Since he got his six months' permit we have no record that he has been in touch with any Russian national, Communist or non-Communist. Nor has anyone from the Iron Curtain tried to meet him. So what's his game, or isn't there one?''

“Am I expected to find the answer?'' Colin asked, exasperated.

“You see something of him,'' Masterson answered, mildly surprised by this antagonism. “We don't. Just keep your eyes open for anything fishy. And humour Mr. Sczili – what's it, this afternoon. That's all now.''

“Thank you, sir.''

Outside the room Colin was joined by Carfax.

“Is this your doing, John?'' he demanded, angrily.

“Is what my doing?''

“Tying me up with this bastard. I wish to God I'd left the house earlier. The rest of them all wanted to get back down to the hotel and I would go on pretending to sort out papers. Anything not to go away for the last time. So I was caught. Serves me right for sheer sentimental indulgence.''

“If I had the smallest idea what you're blathering about—''

“Never mind. Forget it.''

“I ought to know, perhaps.''

They faced one another at a corner where their ways parted.

“Then you damn well aren't going to. I'll do what I'm ordered to do and no more. It's not my job.''

“But it *is* mine. Look, I haven't met the chap yet. Not socially, I mean. Ask me to dinner in about a week's time. Get Margaret to ring me. One or two other people as well. It's important.''

“The hell it is! Why can't you use Stephen, John? He's still the starry-eyed schoolboy where Sudenic is concerned. Get Steve to do your dirty work for you. I'm not the right one for it. I'm not safe. I'm biased.''

He spoke so savagely before he swung away towards his own

room that John Carfax stood looking after him for nearly a minute before he too moved off, walking slowly and thinking over the recent interview and its sequel. Perhaps it would be just as well not to load too much on Colin. He knew the cause, Margaret's old engagement – and it sickened him. A hidden abscess in their marriage festering all these years. Well, if what he knew of the Pole was correct they were both in for some salutary shocks, that would rattle their small closed conventional British world and perhaps fling them out a little wiser, a little more mature. But happier? He shook off these irrelevant musings to settle back into his own world of probing, conjecture, manoeuvre, check and counter-check.

Colin let himself into his house at a quarter past three exactly. He had allowed himself a quarter of an hour in which to prepare for his visitor. He went at once into his study.

While he was still locking up his brief-case in the bureau Ogden knocked and came in.

"There's a gentleman to see you, sir. Polish gentleman, I should say. Not a name I could get my tongue round, first off."

Colin smiled.

"I wouldn't expect you to. Did it sound like Sczilieko wicz?"

"That would be it exactly, sir. I showed him in the drawing-room, you not being at home at the time."

Colin looked startled.

"How long has he been here, then?"

"Not above ten minutes, sir." He was about to explain why he had not seen fit to take the old gentleman into the garden when Colin walked briskly past him into the hall, making for the drawing-room.

"All out except you, Ogden?" he threw back as he reached the other door.

"Mrs. Ogden and Louise are out, sir. But—"

Colin gave him no time to report on the couple in the garden. He nodded briskly as Ogden began to speak and had disappeared before the old man had completed the first sentence. Muttering an unfavourable comment on his master's impatience, Ogden went down to the kitchen. Mrs. Ogden was not yet back from her shopping expedition. Ogden growled again, filled a kettle and put it on to boil. They'd all be crying out for tea before long, he decided.

Sczilіekowicz rose from a chair near the window as Colin entered. The latter's greeting was warm and suitably deferential from a younger man to one at the head of an emigré organization, even if the latter engaged in no political activities which might serve as a bond between them.

"Mr. Masterson thought you would prefer a quiet *milieu* for our talk," Colin began. "I should like to say at once that we do very much appreciate your forbearance and reasonableness over the question of this man, Sudenic."

"Count Sudenic," said the other, gently, "is or was, meaning his father, an important figure in my country."

"Count?" Colin was rather put out. "I had no idea—"

"His father, Count Alexei Sudenic, was a large landowner, a most cultivated man and a personal friend of mine."

"I see," Colin said, cursing his boss for inadequate briefing. "So no wonder you take a deep interest in his son. I suppose Sudenic – Count Sudenic – got in touch with your society as soon as he obtained his temporary residence permit."

"Not exactly," answered Sczilіekowicz. "We heard he was in England and got in touch with him. We wanted to hear his story."

This was better. Colin urged the old man to repeat the version he had been told, and all he knew of the man's family and antecedents. It proved to be disappointingly similar to the results of the original screening.

"That is what we got from him, too," he agreed.

"I believe it is the truth. He is not in the habit of telling lies."

There was a little pause. Colin decided to wait. After all, it was the old Pole who had asked for an interview. So far he had not given any reason for it nor asked any questions. Surely such precautions, such careful privacy, could not have as their sole object the simple matter of confirming Sudenic's statement, which he had said he did not doubt. When at last Sczilіekowicz spoke, Colin's mind was so relieved of confusion and near-guilt that he almost laughed.

The Pole said, "Do you trust him, Mr. Brentwood?"

Official caution withheld a heart-felt 'no'.

"There are certain doubts," Colin answered. "You share them, it seems."

"I will tell you the reason for it, so that you may be more

frank with me. I have described to you the manner of Count Alexei's death with the rest of his family. Boris' expressed a natural horror and grief when he heard it from me. But there is a variant of his description of his own actions which suggests that he persuaded the troop he was with to turn aside, not because the Germans had an ambush for them, but precisely because he knew of the peasant rising and did not wish to run into it, despite the fact that he had sent a message to his family to leave their home and wait for him in a certain place."

"My God!"

"If they had not left their home two days before I passed through Count Sudenic's estate I should have taken the family with me. My friend, his wife and family would have accompanied me into exile."

"I suppose he meant to keep his word to them? Germans or peasants, he got them to leave for their own sakes, didn't he?"

"He did not go to the meeting-place. So they went home again to their deaths. He must have known they would do this."

"Have you proof?"

"That it was he who acted? That he was not forced, as he says? No better proof than he has of his complete innocence. The word of soldiers, of loyal servivors from the Sudenic estate. How can one prove? Especially now, twenty years after the event?"

"One can't, of course. But you have doubts?"

Sczilіekowicz spoke slowly, choosing his words with great care. So far Colin had found his English remarkable both for fluency and correctness, though spoken with a noticeably foreign accent. Now the old man hesitated at times and it was clear that the impediment was all emotional.

"I find this – difficult – and gives me pain to say. Boris I knew as a child – as a young man in a very famous regiment of Poland. His position made him rise – with ease – so that he came here to England as military attaché."

"When he became engaged to my wife," said Colin, steadily. "That is the basis of our present acquaintance with him."

Sczilіekowicz bowed his head in a dignified gesture of appreciation.

"Thank you. This I was told. This explains – or can explain – the mode of entry – can it not? The place chosen."

Colin nodded.

"Boris – as I knew him twenty years ago – was brave, young, inexperienced – full of resource, of ideas – and always truthful. But with a hardness, a lack of – of—They were not originally Polish, you know, the Sudenics. It is not a Polish name."

"No?" Colin said, astonished. "No, I suppose not."

"The family was of origin Czech, perhaps a bit Teutonic. Perhaps that is unkind."

They both smiled a little sheepishly. But it relieved the tension that had built up as Sczilieko wicz ground out his perplexities.

"I would like – all of my friends would like – to trust him – to accept him. But always there comes this feeling – perhaps a traitor – perhaps he betrayed his own family."

"To save himself?" Colin finished.

"That could be the reason. There could be other reasons. With Boris there is nothing simple, it seems."

"I'm with you there," Colin said, fervently.

Again they fell silent. Colin glanced at his watch, surprised to find the time was only a little after half-past three. He felt as if they had been discussing Boris for hours. All his weary distaste for the subject rose in his throat like an ill-digested meal.

It was at this moment that Margaret and the refugee himself appeared on the lawn at the far end of the garden. Colin, having his back to the closed window did not see them, but he saw Sczilieko wicz rise slowly from his chair, his face distorted with fury and affront.

"It is the man himself!" he said, his voice rising. "You have him here and do not tell me of it. It is an outrage!"

Colin sprang up, wheeling round to the window. He was just in time to see Margaret disappear beneath the balcony, followed by Boris, who did not look up. Their footsteps on the iron staircase were clearly heard and Margaret then appeared, with her visitor immediately behind her.

"Hullo, Colin," she said, lightly, as she always did when Boris was with her. "You're back early, aren't you?"

Boris, smiling broadly, advanced from her side.

"My dear Nicolas Stepanovicz," he said, holding out both hands to the old man, "how delightful to find you here!"

Colin pulled himself together with an immense effort. His jaw felt paralysed, as if he had had a large injection of cocaine into

it for work on a tooth. Ignoring Boris he managed to grate out, “Margaret, can I present Mr. Scziliekowicz, president of the Society of Free Poles?’’

Scziliekowicz stepped forward, took Margaret’s offered hand, kissed it with stately formality and stepped back.

“I regret,’’ he murmured. “I leave at once. You will excuse.’’

He was already retreating across the room. Colin had no choice but to follow him into the hall, find his hat and umbrella for him and move on to open the door.

“I had no idea he was here,’’ he pleaded. “I swear I hadn’t. Confound the fellow, what right has he to use my house—’’

A gleam in the old European’s eye checked him. He almost heard the words, ‘And your wife, perhaps?’

“It is unfortunate he has found me here,’’ Scziliekowicz said, coldly. “When we entertained him he gave us to understand he would pass on any information that might come his way that would interest us. I think now it may be the other way round.‘’

“God forbid!’’ Colin exclaimed.

“I do not think God directs the movements of Count Sudenic,’’ was the immediate answer. “Perhaps the devil – perhaps no master but himself. Good afternoon, Mr. Brentwood.’’

Colin murmured his own farewell, too filled with anger and humiliation to attempt to mollify the old man’s just annoyance. That’s torn it, he thought miserably, good and proper, a plate-size blot on the copy book, a clanger by any standard. Damn him, damn him, damn him to hell, he thought, fastening the front door before walking slowly back across the hall.

Chapter Nine

Boris was still there. not even enough tact to take himself off, Colin thought, unreasonably disregarding the fact that Boris's only lines of retreat lay by the back stairs from the hall or else through the french windows of the drawing-room. Neither route would altogether have avoided the risk of meeting Sczilіekowicz in the street. All the same it was galling to see him standing there chatting with Margaret as if nothing had happened.

"I shall be obliged," said Colin, in what Margaret considered his most insufferable F.O. voice, "if you would let me know another time before you barge into our home."

"Colin!" Margaret said, fiercely, "you forget that I invited Boris to call any time he likes."

"It is unfortunate," said Boris, quite obviously unrepentant. "I apologize, Colin. I am on my way to a place I have not found on my map of London. It is very hot. I find myself in Church Street and I think Margaret will tell me how to reach my assignment while I rest for five minutes in your charming garden. The good Ogden—"

"I cannot understand why your English becomes so elementary when you are speaking to me," Colin interrupted in rapid Polish. "On most occasions, when there are other people present, it is very nearly perfect. What's the point of that particular form of clowning?"

"Perhaps," Boris answered gently, "it is because you always succeed in making me feel a stranger in your presence."

"Stop!" Margaret cried at them. "Stop talking in a language I don't understand. Or have you explained to him what a fuss he's making about nothing?" she asked Boris.

"I have explained a little," Boris answered, "but I think Colin does not believe me."

"Of course he believes you. What's this place you're going to? The name of the man you have to see?"

She walked firmly across the room to the telephone and began to flip over the pages of the directory. Colin protested, Boris watched. Margaret ignored them both. She found the number

and dialled.

"I'm speaking for Mr. Sudenic," she said, when she got through. "You are expecting him, I believe. Yes, from the Baltic Trading Company. Mr. Sørensen." She gave a triumphant nod in Colin's direction. "He has been unfortunately delayed. He will be with you in about ten minutes time. Thank you."

"There!" she said, putting back the receiver. "Off you go, Boris. I said ten minutes. You'll have to get a taxi. You'll find one easily enough in Notting Hill Gate; probably pick one up on the way there."

"Thank you," said Boris, quietly. His eyes were shining with amusement and relief and an unaffected admiration. He turned to Colin. "I apologize again," he said. "I did not imagine Sczziliekowicz would have such a guilty conscience."

This remark so astounded Colin that Boris was out of the room before he could move and had closed the front door behind him by the time Colin reached the hall. He went back into the drawing-room. Margaret was sitting down now, looking rather pale. But she had not lost her former impetus. She went at once into attack.

"What on earth possessed you to behave like that to Boris?" she demanded. "He might be your worst enemy."

This was a mistake.

"Perhaps he is," Colin answered immediately.

"What d'you mean?"

"Need I explain?"

"Are you making a vulgar, utterly imbecile suggestion?"

They glared at each other, both of them too deeply hurt to see the essentially misguided nature of their quarrel. Before either could invent a really unforgivable thrust, however, Louise put her head into the room. In spite of the heat she looked cool, her make-up was perfect, her full-skirted, gaily patterned dress was both fresh and pretty.

"Excuse," she said, at once noticing the signs of strain though there had been no sound of raised voices outside the room. "I bring tea."

Leaving the door open, she went out for a moment, to reappear pushing the trolley which was set out with several cups and saucers on the top and plates of sandwiches and small iced cakes of Mrs. Ogden's baking on the shelf below.

"Thank you, Louise," said Margaret, bleakly.

The girl hesitated, looking round the room.

"Mr. Ogden say there are two guests," she began. "They go?"

"They had to go," said Colin.

"Sit down, Louise," Margaret said. "When did you get back?"

She was wondering if the girl had met Boris in the road or if she had reached the house before he left it. Surely she would have said if she had seen him. Anyway she would not have expected to find him in the drawing-room.

"Five minutes, perhaps," Louise told her. "It was too hot at the Institute. Everybody was exhausted."

"You look far from exhausted," Colin said, smiling at her. He was thankful the quarrel had been interrupted, if only for the time being. It had been brewing too long and he knew its violence was not yet expended. In the meantime he hoped to recover his temper so that he might withstand Margaret's inevitably renewed onslaught in a stony silence. This always defeated her.

Louise smiled back at him. The poor Colin, she was thinking. So jealous and with so little cause.

"Then Martha is in, too, is she?" Margaret went on.

"Mrs. Ogden?"

"Yes. To get the tea ready if you have only been in the house five minutes."

"Oh, I see. No, it was Mr. Ogden who prepared the tea. He was going to bring it, but I said it was for me to receive for the trolley."

Margaret knew she ought to correct this very imperfect sentence but she could not be bothered. Louise was a good-natured girl, she knew Ogden found it tiring to go up and down the kitchen stairs. It was thoughtful of Louise to stand at the service lift in the dining-room to load the trolley. Though of course she would be having tea with them.

"What about pouring out?" said Colin, with false jocularity.

"Sorry," Margaret answered, with equally false submission.

Louise did not linger over the meal, which she always considered superfluous. Nor had the Brentwoods much appetite. Before she wheeled out the trolley again Louise said, "I forget to ask, Mrs. Brentwood. I will be late tonight. It is a party with my friend, Lotte."

“Did you forget to tell me?” Margaret asked, a little put out because she had counted upon having the girl there to act as a buffer between herself and Colin for the evening. “Or has it only just blown up?”

“That,” said Louise, laughing. “This afternoon it blow up.”

“Blew up.”

“Blew? Yes. Blow. Has blown. Blew.”

“Never mind. You’ll be out to dinner, then?”

“Please.”

“I’ll give you a key,” Margaret said, getting up.

“I can let her in,” Colin suggested. “I’ve some work to do that’ll keep me up, I expect. How late will you be?” he asked Louise.

She shrugged, looking hopefully at Margaret.

“You shall have a key,” the latter assured her.

When Louise had gone an uncomfortable silence filled the room, broken only when Margaret said she must bring her writing things in from the garden.

“I’ll come with you,” Colin said.

“Why?”

“Why not?”

The fight was on again, all the more bitter for the short armistice over tea, all the more savage that each knew Boris was only a catalyst, not a prime cause, in their fundamental difference.

Having put her papers together, Margaret would have gone straight back to the house, but Colin stopped her with a heavy hand on her arm.

“You’ve got to tell me,” he said. “I can’t stand much more of this. It’s bad enough having to watch him for—”

He broke off, but too late.

“So you spy on him, do you?” she burst out. “As if he hadn’t enough to contend with you’ve poisoned the minds of the people who can help him or send him back to his death?”

“Nonsense. Hysterical nonsense. Much more likely he’s trying to use me.” Caution, once breached, collapsed as the flood poured from him. “I suspected at the start he came here as a spy. He was planted by the Russians. They often do it. So do we, for that matter. Every country does. It’s standard practice. It isn’t *that* I mind, so much. It’s using you to worm his way in. You

were ready for it from the start, weren't you? The long-lost lover. There's nothing in it for you, my girl. So don't think there is."

"Let me *go*!" Margaret panted. She struck at his hand on her arm, striking, tearing, until he dropped his hand, not noticing where her nails had started a thin red trickle from his wrist.

"You seem to want me to hate you!" she cried. "Or can't you even see me, the real me, behind the poor misused self you look at all the time? I think you're mad. There's nothing between Boris and me but an old friendship, not very well renewed. He's changed a lot – as I've changed."

But only just – only beginning – she cried to herself, weeping inwardly for her dying love, her dead girlhood.

Colin looked at her with dull eyes, hearing only the false note as she ended.

"You haven't changed," he said. "God knows I've waited and hoped. But you haven't changed. You never will."

"You accuse him of attempting to use you," she swept on. "How? He practically never sees you. What can he get from you? You never bring anything home that matters. You aren't allowed to."

"He knows too much. He knew Sczziliekowicz would be here today. He came into the house exactly when he meant to. He's ruined our relations with that particular society. They'll never trust us again. I shall be on the mat for it. It was a serious interview."

"I don't believe you."

"You can believe what you like. It was Sudenic's doing."

"Now," she said, beside herself with rage, grief and a new gnawing anxiety grown from his words, "now listen to me. Boris told me today about his wife and children, how he loved them. The woman betrayed him and he knows he will never see any of them again."

"You believed this story?"

"Oh, you're impossible!" she threw at him. "It's useless to tell you anything."

She left him under the trees, walking quickly to the house. Mrs. Ogden, back at last, saw her from the kitchen window.

"She looks fair upset," she said. "What's been going on 'ere this afternoon?"

“Happen it’s thunder we’ve got coming.” Ogden answered, supported by a distant growl almost as he finished speaking.

Colin, sitting hunched up on the day-bed, heard the thunder, too, considering it fully appropriate to his mood and circumstances. He stayed, brooding miserably, until he noticed the thin line of dried blood on the back of his hand. At any rate, he thought, *I* did no violence to *her*. Morally, he felt one up on her for that and drew a faint comfort from the thought. When a brief spatter of heavy drops struck the leaves above him he got up, folded the day-bed, put it away with the deck-chairs and went back into the house.

The storm that was circling in a kind of moody, undecided menace over London that evening caused many people to dive into doorways for shelter when those first heavy drops fell. Among them was Louise, who turned to put over her mass of bright curls one of those unbecoming, strictly functional pieces of plastic material that are so much less cumbersome to take about than an umbrella. Her summer coat, which was showerproof and which she carried over her arm, she now pulled on. Her shoes, black for the evening with high stiletto heels would just have to suffer. She watched the large drops spread on the pavement and dry quickly. Before five minutes had passed she was on her way again.

Boris, too, lifted his head to inspect the sky when the first drops struck his nose. But he continued on his way. Thunderstorms, he decided, like so much else in England, seemed incapable of making up their minds. This attitude was confirmed by his recent business interview. He was late, but he was kept waiting all the same. If he had been punctual, he learned from the secretary, he would have waited longer. The delay was not at all a deliberate punishment for his own ineptitude.

However, the affair had gone well. Sørensen would be satisfied. He knew that the managing director suspected his double role and resented the fact that he himself was not admitted into his government’s confidence. Though this was in no way Boris’s fault it did not help Sørensen to regard him with any favour. But this afternoon’s transaction, though of a minor nature, ought to persuade him that his curious translator and odd-job man was, at least in part, genuinely concerned to

promote the business, whatever else he did.

Since he had less distance to travel and had not stopped on the way, Boris arrived first at the rendezvous. This was an insignificant restaurant in an area near Queen's Road. The whole district was a mixture of large old Victorian houses, for the most part run down, side by side with smaller slum property, in process of demolition, with new development springing up in patches, all height and glass and concrete. The demolition followed roughly those parts that had been bombed during the war and had thereafter been shut up behind hoardings. But some of it, bordering on the network of railway tracks finding their way to Paddington station, consisted of small, close-packed, old-fashioned railway workers' cottages, in terrace formation for the most part, with here and there a group of little shops, a pub, even a small enclosed square or cul-de-sac at the end of a narrow alleyway.

The restaurant where Boris found a table and sat down to wait was in the middle of one of these groups of shops and had been a general grocer's itself until it failed in competition with the local supermarkets. Then a Pole, who had been in the British army in the war, managed to scrape together enough money to buy the place, put in a new front at street level, though not above and opened it with the help of an Italian cook. Boris discovered it when he explored the neighbourhood of his most recent dwelling.

Louise was nearly ten minutes late.

"But you gave me very little time," she protested, when he told her of this. They spoke in French as they usually did in public places. "If I had not come back early today you would not have seen me here at all. I didn't know I should find you just leaving the house."

"No. I didn't know, either. You can stay?"

"I told Mrs. Brentwood I was asked to a party of Swiss friends. A sudden invitation. That was true, at any rate. Made at my class today, I told her."

"That was a lie."

"Would you prefer me to tell Mrs. Brentwood I am having an affair with you?"

"Hush."

"They are all English here, aren't they? Except the proprietor

and his cook?''

"They were,'' answered Boris, shortly.

One of the two very sleazy waitresses came to their table with a couple of covered dishes.

"I ordered while I was waiting for you,'' Boris said, smiling. "After all, there are only two dishes on the menu worth eating and we had the other one last time.''

Louise laughed, then leaned forward.

"Why did you say – that – before the food arrived?''

"Because there are four men who are sitting now in the window alcove at the right side of the door, who are speaking Polish and who came in about three minutes after you did.''

She did not look round; Boris had trained her sufficiently for that. Besides, she was not really interested in the more puzzling side of his life. She was in love with him and that was enough.

But she noticed the thoughtful look on his face as he told her about his compatriots and felt a slight anxiety as she listened.

"They won't want to talk to you, will they? They must not spoil our evening together. I couldn't bear that. Such a wonderful surprise to be destroyed for no reason—''

"There would be a reason,'' said Boris, gently. "I think I know who they are.''

"Then we can just greet them as we go out. Must there be more?''

"I must not appear to avoid them,'' said Boris, smiling a little. "But I will tell you what to do. We shall certainly not miss our evening together, my darling.''

"Tell me, then.'' His voice, caressing her, commanded her full submission.

"When I hung up your coat for you just now I put in the pocket, the right-hand pocket, a key of my new flat and a paper telling you the address and how to get there.''

"Have you moved again?'' She was disagreeably startled.

"Need that upset you? Or even surprise? When we finish our coffee you will take your coat to the ladies' room here and put the key in a safe place. Then you will learn what the paper says and put that down the drain. You understand?''

It was the first time he had asked her to take part in the game

he played with so much care, ease and familiarity. She giggled.

"It's like a film," she said, longing to turn round and stare at the four strange figures near the door. Did they carry knives – or revolvers? Did they wear hats pulled down over their faces?

"A film by Alfred Hitchcock," she said, still laughing softly.

"It is essentially rather boring," Boris told her. "But unfortunately necessary."

His tone was grave and his bearing remote. She understood, as she had always suspected, that there were tracts in his life, factual and spiritual, where she would never enter, never be allowed to trespass. Perhaps, she told herself, with true Swiss sturdy common sense, she would not enjoy those aspects of him at all. As a lover he was wonderful. Wasn't that enough? More than she had ever hoped for during her stay in this curious, easy-going, indifferent country? Particularly in the circle in which the Brentwoods moved; so polite, so cold, so basically uninterested in her and her needs. But outside it, too. Everywhere. Foreigners were creatures apart, like animals, to be treated kindly, even indulgently, if they behaved well. But if they appeared to be harmful or vicious, on grounds perhaps solely of prejudice, then they must be removed or destroyed as pests were destroyed, without further question, without mercy, with complete self-justification.

"What are you thinking?" Boris asked. He had never seen Louise in such a serious mood and did not like it. She was his present escape from reality. She must be gay, amusing, happy, as full of warmth and life in her speech as her body was in his arms.

"I am thinking about being a foreigner in this country," she answered, truthfully.

"A big subject," he answered. "I often think of it myself."

"I bet you do!" She was laughing again now, looking so young and so delightfully pretty that she made him laugh himself for pure pleasure.

"Now you must go. To the ladies' room, first. The bus fare will be ninepence. I will come to you as soon as I can, but don't wait for me after ten."

"What d'you mean?" She was suddenly afraid.

"That I may be delayed. I hope not, but I can't be sure. Now go."

Louise got up at once. Boris rose to give her her coat, then sat down again to catch the waitress's eye and ask for his bill. Louise disappeared through the dingy curtained opening with 'Ladies' above it in black on a white chipped china plaque. He did not move until she came out again and then only bowed, without rising, to acknowledge her lifted hand. She left the restaurant, turning to the right as instructed.

The waitress brought his bill. He laid the tip on the table and went over to the desk near the door. As he turned away after paying the bill he found two men in his path.

"Good evening, Comrade Sudenic," said one of these, in Polish. "Can we persuade you to have another cup of coffee with us?"

"You can, indeed," said Boris, evenly. "But there is more room at the table I have just left. And besides," he said, smiling faintly, "window tables are a little draughty, don't you think, even if they do command the door?"

Chapter Ten

He led the way back to the corner table he had occupied with Louise, not bothering to look behind him to see if the others were following. He sat down and at once they were all there on each side and opposite, their elbows on the stained cloth, their grave, humourless faces and hard eyes bent upon him. Boris beckoned to the waitress and ordered more coffee for them all.

"You know the name by which I live at present," Boris said, calmly, looking at each in turn. "But you have not told me yours."

The man who had first accosted him made up for this deficiency. It was a meaningless gesture, as Boris knew only too well, but it gave him an opening for his next remark, keeping the initiative in his own hands.

"Two of you I have seen before," he said. "I thought then that it was not by chance. Now I know I was right and I can discover more, perhaps. But first, will you tell me to whom you owe allegiance? To the Party in Poland or to your master farther east?"

"The socialist countries are one," said Galinski, the spokesman, but without enthusiasm.

"And a Pole is a Pole is a Pole," answered Boris and added softly, "Just as a Russian is always a Russian."

He smiled as he saw the effect of his remark on the faces round him.

"I am a Pole," he said and went on smiling.

"That is not according to our information," Galinski told him. "We understand that you were sent here to work for the Soviet Union as you have been doing for a number of years. Your previous record was a criminal one."

"My previous record was made up of Stalin's famous mistakes," said Boris, evenly. "It has since been cancelled."

"You were sent here with excellent opportunities, carefully provided for."

"Now there," answered Boris, vigorously, "you have a splendid example of their well-known cunning, married to

inevitable inefficiency. My landing was arranged – yes – everyone knows that. The British were not deceived for a moment. In fact they were expecting me – some of them. But the house where I was to find an old couple to befriend me no longer housed them. They were dead. Instead I found two people who had known me well and who recognized me at once. In addition, the son of the old dead pair, who was to have met me much much later in London, was there, too. Result, emotional overtones, crude suspicions, the subtle opening ruined. All because there had been no recent check on those two old people.''

"Does that account for your total lack of activity for nearly four months?'' Galinski demanded. "You may have antagonized this Brentwood, but have you got nothing from him?''

"Nothing. And never shall.''

"Other contacts?''

"Such as?''

One of the other men spoke in a harsh voice.

"You work at this Baltic Trading Company. They have an agent working at this office. You cultivate her company.''

"Not extensively,'' Boris answered. "She is very beautiful. I have lunch with her occasionally.''

"You have not answered the question.''

"I don't think you asked one. In any case by what authority are you here at all? If you are so sure of my position in the Soviet service, why not inquire of the appropriate person at their embassy?''

Galinski said slowly, "We should prefer to hear from you direct.''

"I see.'' Boris looked again at each of them in turn. "You want my information unedited, unexpurgated. Do you propose to pay me for this service? Or am I to help you as a fellow-countryman? How do I know you really are what you represent yourselves to be? This may be a trap laid by the free Poles, who are extremely anxious to make me one of them; to bind me to them, in fact, hand and foot. You have neither said nor done anything to convince me of your true identity.''

"What proof do you need?''

"What proof can you possibly give me, here and now? None.''

"Exactly. That's why we came to persuade you to meet the

one who directs us. You will recognize him.”

Boris rose at once.

“Very well. I have agreed to nothing at all, so you hold nothing against me. But I don’t intend to waste the whole evening over this. Besides, there are far too many of you. Do I really need a posse of the Western type to keep me with you?”

Galinski was also on his feet. Ignoring Boris’s last question he said. “It will not take long. He will meet us outside your block of flats. We can speak together in your rooms. He’s probably waiting there now. We can walk there in five minutes.“

They moved to the door, two of them in front, then Boris with Galinski close at his elbow and the fourth man just behind. In the same formation they turned to walk along the street.

Boris was thinking furiously. He did not intend to show these men that he had changed his home again. They had evidently kept up with his moves so far; perhaps all the others had, too. He still possessed one key to the old flat, the extra one he had had made for it. The new tenants were not in, yet. He had learned this from the caretaker that morning before he left. Perhaps, if the caretaker had not removed his name from the board and from the door he could hold this absurd conference in the flat, after all. It would be difficult, otherwise, to get rid of so many.

It was not difficult at all. They walked past two little shops, one a newsagent-tobacconist with new paper boards leaning against the wall below the dirty window. They came to the mouth of an alleyway leading into a narrow cul-de-sac with small houses on either side of it and the tall fence of the railway cutting at the end.

Though the storm had grumbled off into the distance, taking the rain with it, the sky was pitch black and gave a feeling, so oppressive was the heated air, of being considerably lower than it should be, not much higher than the roofs of the houses, a flat black metal grill, heated from the other side. The street was lighted by infrequent, old-fashioned lamp standards, one being placed on the edge of the pavement opposite the alley openings, so making its shadow even darker than it might otherwise have been. The attack came from the darkness of the alley as the five men were walking past it.

Boris saw the figures pile out of the shadows, so when one of

them, breaking past two of his recent guards or captors, seized his arm he was prepared. The man gave a choking cry. Stooping low Boris struck again, turned quickly, dived past another struggling pair and reached the alley opening, sliding back into the shadow.

A man ran past him, his eyeballs glinting in the lamp light as he emerged on the street, all his attention for the fight. Boris, flattened against the wall, understanding that this was a native of the cul-de-sac, stayed motionless. He had seen his assailant fall.

Directly afterwards and as the man from the cul-de-sac slipped past the still struggling group and ran away up the street, a black car drew in to the pavement and three men jumped from it. Boris waited no longer, but moved quickly into the cul-de-sac, hearing as he did so a police whistle not far away, followed by the sound of running footsteps.

In the doorway just ahead of him a shape moved and a soft voice said, "'Nother row, was it? Satisfied?"

Boris gave a loud grunt, moved forward towards the voice and found warm arms clasped about his neck. The girl or woman, he could not see her face, only a pale blur beneath his own, evidently mistook him for the man who had run out, he decided. So be it. His own arms went round her and his mouth found hers.

"Oo!" she said, wriggling away and immediately pressing close again. "A bit of excitement don't ' alf pep you up, Sid!"

A torch shone into the cul-de-sac. Boris moved forward a little and bent his head to stop her mouth with another kiss. A train thundered past in the cutting, drowning all other sound. But she pulled her head away to whisper in his ear, "It's a copper! Did you see anythink out there? Don't you dare speak to 'im! I'm not getting mixed up in anythink!"

"Shut up, then!" he whispered back, hoping his words and accent would pass. He kissed her again and this time she was quiet in his arms.

The constable flashed his light on the amorous pair. He was not deceived. They knew he was there all right, but they weren't interested. Well, they looked as if they were having a long session, had been at it right through, so why get into an argument? After moving round the rest of the small area, seeing

window curtains drop silently as the light reached them, hearing radios turned up higher as he passed, he left the place and went outside.

He was puzzled. From the end of the street he had seen a fight in progress for a few seconds before it broke up. He had seen several men bundle into a black car waiting at the kerb and several more scatter and run away. Going quickly to the scene of the fight he had found blood on the pavement but no victim. Taken him off in the car, he decided, wondering if any of the local gangs had been involved and if so, why. He had then inspected the cul-de-sac and returned to the street still puzzled. But his duty was plain. He must report to his station and then stand by the blood-stain until they sent someone to investigate.

The public telephone box was on the corner some distance away. There was no police pillar in that street. The constable set off towards it. On the way he passed the man from the cul-de-sac who had dialled 999 and then, seeing through the window of the box the fight dissolve, had replaced the receiver and turned back. He saw no point in stopping the rozzer now. Never where they were wanted, as usual.

When Boris heard the constable's footsteps move away he released the girl, murmured indistinctly and began to move away.

"Now wot's up with you?" she demanded, unwilling to break off Sid's new high-powered technique. "Must ' ave another dekko, must you? You men!"

Boris walked into the empty street and turned away. The man from the cul-de-sac turned into it a few seconds later. As he did so lightning flashed, thunder followed at once in a shattering roar and rain hissed down.

"Had to follow the copper, did you?" the girl greeted him, pulling him into the doorway out of the rain. "Why didn't you speak to 'im when 'e was in 'ere?"

"Wot d' you mean in ' ere? I went down to phone. 'E passed me coming back. But the chaps'd run off by then."

The truth broke into her mind with shattering impact. Not Sid. A stranger. One of the gang. Might have murdered her! Instead – Bitter disappointment mixed with shock and fear. Not Sid. Those smashing kisses. Not Sid's.

"Wot's up with you?" he demanded, roughly.

“I like that. Leaving me ’ere. Sticking your nose into wot don’t concern you—”

He stopped her mouth as Boris had done, but oh, so differently. And she could never even tell him. Or not till they were married and he could take a joke. Perhaps not then.

When Sid had gone she went straight up to her room. She found on the back of her dress the mark of fingers, a spread of dark red streaks that she recognized as blood. She washed it out easily enough and crept shivering into bed. Now she would never tell Sid or anyone. Could she ever forget?

Boris walked all the way to his new flat. The rain had stopped as abruptly as it had begun. There had been no more thunder. But the storm was evidently going round and round as storms had a way of doing. The air had not cleared, nor the sky. A dirty night in more than one sense.

He arrived a little after ten, but Louise was still there. She had made up the bed, for the linen cupboard was not locked. She was already leaning back on the pillows, waiting for him, her clothes neatly piled on a chair.

He undressed in the bathroom. He was worried by the blood he had seen on his right hand when he opened the door of the flat. He had kept the hand in his pocket as he stood in the bedroom doorway smiling at Louise lying there, the sheet drawn up high, her bare arms outside it, a book in her hands. In the bathroom he took off each garment carefully and laid it down separately. Stupid of him to imagine the stickiness had been merely the heat and the exertion of the fight. That girl’s dress must be stained, too. Well, nothing could be done about that now. Probably she would keep her mouth shut. If not—

He hid the shirt where Louise would not see it when she used the bathroom later. Then he went back to her, prepared to sink all his problems in an hour of unmixed pleasure.

He was not, however, allowed to submerge immediately.

“What is this nasty cheap perfume you wear?” Louise demanded.

“Me?”

“It is on your hair and your face.”

“My new hair tonic, perhaps? It rained as I came away from the restaurant. That would bring out the scent.”

Why had not the rain washed it away, he wondered, angrily.

Louise disregarded his explanation.

"You don't use hair tonic. Your hair is strong and grows easily."

"Shaving cream, perhaps?"

"I know your shaving cream. This is not a man's perfume at all, it is a woman's."

"Are you accusing me?"

"I am asking you. I have never smelled this cheap perfume before."

"I can promise you that you never will again."

"Then you admit it?"

"What should I admit?"

"That you have been with another woman today. The scent is very strong."

"I utterly deny what you suggest. I swear to you that I have only seen and spoken to two women today, besides yourself. Margrethe Olsen at the office and Margaret Brentwood at her home."

He spoke the truth with evident self-righteousness.

"Moreover, Mrs. Brentwood would never use such a perfume. Margrethe uses none at all. She is a tall, pale-golden ice-maiden."

Louise made a sound expressing rage and disbelief.

"If you don't stop this ridiculous complaint and interruption," Boris told her, "I will turn you out of my bed and send you home. And tomorrow I will set about melting the ice-maiden."

"You wouldn't dare," said Louise, but she knew very well that her position was far from impregnable. So she said no more and allowed the love-making to proceed unhindered.

After Louise had gone Boris washed his shirt carefully, blessing the new English drip-dry material of which it was made. Then he turned to his suit and went over it carefully with a lens, sponging out any stains he found on the material. The rain had made the legs of the trousers and the front of the jacket damp. Boris inspected both the outside and the inside of each garment with particular care and brushed out the turn-ups of the trousers. After hunting about in the cupboards of the flat he discovered an electric iron. While he pressed the suit he thought over the events of the evening. He realized that he still did not know what the Polish comrades wanted of him, but it was very

clear that their Russian counterparts had made one of their usual rough blunders. The black car had been meant for him, obviously, because he had not so far obeyed any of his instructions or attempted to make any of the ordered contacts. It would be interesting to see what happened next. Someone had been hurt, a Russian undoubtedly, because he must have been removed in the car. There had been no sound of an ambulance bell and no time for one to be summoned and arrive. The police officer, the Poles, the Russians, the fallen body, all had vanished when he himself left the alleyway. The blood on the ground, washed by the rain, would by now have vanished also. He hoped the injury he had dealt would not be fatal. He had no personal feelings of animosity against anyone. They would certainly treat the victim themselves if they could. Publicity, in such cases, was the worst kind of propaganda.

Curiously enough, the knife was scarcely stained at all, Boris noted, as he dealt with it last of all. When he had finished he ran the tap for five minutes to clear any traces of blood from the waste pipe. It was unlikely that the police would call on him tonight, if at all, but routine precaution was important. He took the clean weapon and Stephen's revolver into his bedroom, to be ready at hand if any callers came to disturb his rest.

Then he went to bed and slept dreamlessly till dawn.

Chapter Eleven

The dinner for Boris, suggested to Colin by John Carfax as a social introduction to that enigmatic alien, took place about a week later.

Margaret understood the implication because she was well aware of the kind of work Carfax did. As a counter-measure and a safeguard for Boris she invited her parents to meet him. They seldom visited London in the summer, since her father was now retired and both he and her mother were keen gardeners. But having heard an account of Boris's strange reappearance and still more peculiar behaviour since, their natural curiosity overcame their reluctance to travel from home in June. Margaret had warned them that the man was very much changed. This probably meant that Margaret had changed, as was only right and proper. They had no reason, besides, to feel any embarrassment on her behalf.

"It isn't as if the fellow had thrown her over," Sir Charles said to his wife. "Couldn't have got away after the Russians nabbed him."

"It seems so dreadfully unfair," Lady Lang agreed. "After all, we were all supposed to be allies. I'm only thankful Margaret didn't insist on getting married and going out to Poland with him before the war started."

"He decided that," her husband answered. "Knew what was coming. More than we did. Ostriches. I said so at the time. No better than ostriches."

"If you had those doubts so strongly why didn't you press them at the time?" Lady Lang insisted, not for the first time.

"Wanted to be an ostrich, like the rest," he answered. "But my voice wouldn't have had any effect. Not my job, anyway. Nothing would have, till Churchill took over. Too late then to bother. He knew it all."

"I shall always be grateful to poor Boris for leaving her behind, though I've never dared say that to her. I always had a soft spot for him. Dear Colin is so reserved, bless him."

She smiled her rueful smile of total disapproval, but Sir

Charles only grunted in reply. He did not exactly like Colin, but he had not exactly liked Boris, either. Colin was doing well in his department. He had a gift for languages. He could have made a career in the diplomatic if he wasn't quite so stiff. There was some talk, even now, of sending him out east, somewhere. Better keep that under his hat, though.

In addition to her parents Margaret had asked Stephen and Ann to her party and to balance John Carfax, Louise was to dine with them. That still made them one woman short. She sent an invitation to Lady Cotville, who was always so interested in what went on in her neighbours' gardens. Margaret had been invited to tea with the elderly widow; it was time she made some return effort. Ten was a reasonable number to entertain at home. She refused to enlarge further Mrs. Ogden's burden of cooking in spite of Colin's suggestion that they might as well make it twelve while they were about it and get even with two more obligations.

"The more people we ask the easier it will be for Boris to avoid John. Which is exactly what you *don't* want, isn't it?"

"Oh, all right," Colin said, crossly. "Have it your own way, as usual."

This was too childish to require an answer, so the party remained at ten.

The thundery weather of the week before had given place to several days of rain, followed on the morning of the party by a deliciously fresh, sunny morning that had developed into a burning noon and a clear evening with a cool breeze. Boris had enjoyed every minute of it, especially the prospect of a real dinner-party in Colin's house, at which Louise was to be present. She could not tell him who the other guests would be, but Stephen had rung up that morning to say that he and Ann would be there and to warn him that the older Langs had been invited. So it would have to be dinner-jackets, if he had one. If not he could hire; lots of people did.

"You are a good friend, Stephen," Boris told him, gratefully. "I have my own evening clothes. They pay me well at Sørensen's. I enjoy complete civilization once more."

Louise herself opened the front door to him. She had dressed early in order to do precisely this, which she described to Margaret as "I save Mrs. Ogden to climb up the kitchen stairs."

Boris was looking very fine in his dinner-jacket, with his raincoat hanging over one arm. Since the night of the storm he had not trusted the English weather, even in summer. Louise took his coat from him, threw it on a chair in the hall and led him into the drawing-room.

It was empty, the french windows on to the balcony were open, the curtains undrawn, the garden beyond, drained of colour, was dissolving into the blue mist of the evening sky. The setting sun burned the top branches of the cherry tree. In other uncurtained rooms in the houses round about a few lights shone with a paler fire.

Louise snapped on some lights, pulled the windows shut, drew the curtains across. She made for the door again but Boris caught her hand.

"Don't go! I must look at you. You are so beautiful tonight, my darling."

She was wearing her one evening dress, so seldom needed before that day. It had a close-fitting, strapless pleated chiffon top and a full skirt of layers of chiffon, pale green over pale grey over silver satin. A ball dress, really, much too grand for a mere family dinner. But Boris had not seen it, nor had the Brentwoods, so she had put it on for their benefit, especially for Boris. He never took her to dances. So—

"You are enchanting in that dress," he repeated, drawing her gently closer.

"You are not to spoil my make-up."

"I never spoil your make-up."

He kissed her, very carefully, very slowly, very gently. His arms were still about her and his mouth lingering on hers when Margaret pushed open the half-closed door and came into the room.

Boris dropped his hands, stepped forward, greeting her politely. Louise, in a swirl of chiffon, disappeared. Boris held out his hand, took Margaret's, which had responded automatically, clicked his heels together and bent his head in his customary salutation. Margaret glanced at her hand as he released it; there was no stain of lipstick, she saw.

She was quite furiously angry; if she had not been struggling to control herself she would not have allowed him to kiss her hand. Now it was too late. If she burst out at him now it would

be unpardonable rudeness.

"Do you smoke?" she said, icily. "I never remember."

"No, thank you."

"Colin will be down in a minute. I must apologize for not being here to receive you."

She moved to the mantelpiece and continued, without looking round, "But you managed to amuse yourself, I noticed."

Boris did not answer at once. Then he said, "You are very angry with me. But it is not as you think."

"Louise is in my care. These young *au pair* girls are very inexperienced. They are sent to learn English, but a lot of them just want to get away from home and have a good time. I feel responsible to some extent. Even nowadays, when promiscuity seems to have no importance one way or another."

"It is not as you think," he repeated. "Louise is – experienced. We are two lonely people in this great city. We know exactly what we do."

She would have interrupted him, but he held up his hand.

"Forgive me, but I must finish. Louise will stay with you – how long? Six months? One year? This she knows. Her fiancé in Switzerland was willing that she come here. He has a business. Her English will help him."

Margaret was astonished, inclined to be shocked. She looked very handsome, Boris thought, and very English, standing there in her straight, admirably cut, dark blue dress; so simple, so plain, with the pearls and the good brooch, platinum and diamonds, that Colin had provided. He waited for her answer, knowing what it would be.

"She has never told me she's engaged! How *can* she behave like this? Deceiving the poor man in this absolutely shameless way."

He noticed that she assumed rightly his embrace was not the first of its kind as far as Louise was concerned. He was glad she did not pursue this angle.

"I think it is most likely the fiancé too consoles himself for the separation."

"And you? You take the situation as a matter of course?"

Her anger flared again, mixed now with jealousy fanning the worn embers.

"You are of the same generation as me," she said. "When we

were young this sort of behaviour would have been unthinkable. I mean, so open, so indiscreet, involving friends of our own sort. In some circles, yes. The wilder ones, the so-called intellectuals, the leftish writers and artists, students probably, if they could afford it. Even with them it was less open, less displayed on purpose, less offensive; it was still believed to be against the rules. A matter of principle, not as now, taken as a matter of course, a trivial, unimportant—"

"Food," said Boris, gently, "is taken as a matter of course, not as a matter of principle, but it is very important, never trivial. I know this because I have been starving for many years in Siberia."

"It isn't the same!" Margaret insisted. "You degrade it by that comparison. Love is more than lust."

"Oh yes. But you accuse me of lust, I think. And love is a necessary thing, too."

"I was faithful to you for years," she went on rapidly, goaded into full confession. "Perhaps always until you came back. That was real love. Something you apparently don't understand. Perhaps you never will."

"Poor Margaret," he said, sadly. "I think you deceive yourself."

The door opened, Louise's voice, subdued and fearful, announced, "Sir Charles and Lady Lang," and Margaret's parents moved forward into the room, followed almost immediately by Stephen and Ann.

Lady Lang presented her cheek to Margaret, who offered her own in such a way that neither touched. Then the elder woman turned to Boris.

"You needn't tell me who this is," she said, all smiles and gracious friendliness. "Boris, you haven't changed an atom. Has he, Margaret?"

Boris kissed her hand. "Quite like the old days," she murmured to his bowed head, and meant all of the nostalgia she put into her voice. What a pity there had to be the war. He was such a splendid-looking man. Broader now, of course, lined a bit, as one would expect. But such an interesting face. And amusing, too. There was a little smile lifting the corners of his mouth as he looked at her, that meant he appreciated the absurd side of this reunion. Really, they had left it rather late in the

day, but it was Charles's fault. Or was it really Colin's. Poor Colin. Such a contrast.

Sir Charles joined them. He stared at Boris for several seconds before holding out his hand. He was clearly moved and did not bother to conceal it.

"Thank God you managed to escape the brutes in the end, my dear boy," he said. "Afraid I blamed you for a time for not getting in touch with us again. After that we heard you were definitely killed in action."

"I never believed it," said Margaret quickly.

"From whom did you hear that?" Boris asked.

"Polish authorities over here. Red Cross confirmed later to the best of their knowledge. But of course when they nabbed you, you hadn't an earthly. Siberia, Margaret tells us. Unspeakable barbarians. Stupid lot, too."

"Thank you," Boris said, quietly. He had always liked this man, who was to have been his father-in-law. Limited, passionate under a cool exterior, entirely honest and hard-working and now so stout, with white hair, looking much older than his wife. In 1938 she appeared to be older than he. But perhaps that was because he was so young himself at the time.

"Come off it, Father," Stephen rebuked, drawing near with Ann's hand in his. "This is no occasion for chewing over the past, is it, Boris?"

"I am pleased to find I have such – I have friends who remember me so long," Boris answered. "And I no longer feel the chains of my imprisonment."

He spoke very simply, but with such manifest feeling that all the others felt instantly the most acute discomfort. Particularly at the reference to chains. Ann, however, made no pretence of ignoring his words. She slipped her free hand into his, pulling the other one away from Stephen. There were tears in her eyes.

"Darling Boris," she said, "how beautifully you said that."

"Darling Ann," he answered, smiling down at her, "You are wonderful."

"That's quite enough of that," said Stephen. "Why do you two always start flirting shamelessly in front of my face?"

"Would you have us flirt behind your back?" Boris asked.

"He never gives me a chance of that," Ann retorted. "We might be an old married couple already. Honestly!"

"Bravo, Ann," laughed Boris, but he dropped her hand and turned again to Lady Lang.

Louise came into the room with a note, followed by Colin, who went distractedly from one to another of his guests, apologizing for his late appearance, but giving no explanation of it.

"Drinks!" he groaned. "No one has a drink – *yet*!"

He looked towards Margaret but she was reading the note.

"Help me, Steve!"

The two men went over to a wide tray filled with bottles and glasses.

"Lady Cotville can't come," Margaret announced. "She might have sent this earlier. Now we're a man too many."

"Are we?" Boris said, counting heads and allowing for Louise.

"John isn't here yet, Colin. I suppose he is really coming? *He* hasn't sent a note."

"He'd ring up," Colin answered, still busy with the bottles.

"Mr John Carfax," said Louise from the door.

Colin broke off to introduce the late arrival. Margaret made the signal she had arranged with Louise to tell Mrs. Ogden that everyone had arrived. The hired waitress, who had watched the arrivals from the back of the hall, though not condescending to open the door to them, retired to the dining-room. Conversation in the drawing-room became general, voices rose as alcohol reached the blood-stream, Carfax worked his way by degrees to Boris's side.

At last a booming noise arose in the hall, developing from a low throb to a shattering roar.

"She's found the gong!" Margaret yelled above the din. "Shall we go in, everyone?"

"Haven't heard the old gong for months!" Colin was beaming. He had brought the thing down from Higlett, but for some reason the Ogdens never used it in this house.

He offered his arm with a formal gesture to his mother-in-law and led her off. Sir Charles captured Ann from Stephen who politely latched himself on to Louise. Margaret looked helplessly at the two men left standing together.

"They've taken the bit between their teeth," she said. "My family's manners are very deficient. I'm afraid we're one short. Shall we go in?"

“I’ll be with you in a second,” Carfax said. He had moved to a table by the window and seemed to be having difficulty with his cigarette holder.

Margaret, surprised, put out, hesitated for a couple of seconds, but getting no help from Boris, said lamely, “They’ll be all in a muddle over their places. Buck up, John! Bring Boris with you.”

She went out quickly, not noticing, as both men had, the light flickering through the window curtains, nor hearing the heavy tread on the iron steps to the balcony.

Carfax, who was the nearer, took a step forward, pulled aside one half of the curtain, unlatched the window on that side and thrust it open. He saw a tall blue-uniformed figure with a constable’s helmet above a very young face. Stepping back a little in surprise he noticed that Boris had moved with great swiftness into the corner between the curtain and the wall. He was aware, in the same instant, that there was a gun in the Pole’s hand.

“This isn’t the front door, officer,” Carfax said, pleasantly. “Hadn’t you better go round and ring the bell?”

As he spoke he edged sideways towards Boris, both to allow the constable to enter if he insisted and to cover Boris, particularly his armed right hand, with his own body.

The young policeman came forward a little into the room. He acknowledged Boris’s presence with a nod. Carfax moved a little farther back until he was almost touching the Pole.

“I did ring, sir. There was no answer. There was a lot of noise inside. I made my way down the passage at the side to the back door and knocked.”

“No answer again?”

“No, sir.”

“It’s a dinner-party,” Carfax explained. “Everyone very busy, you know. Meal just going on. Can I help you?”

“It’s about a car, sir. ADF 5000. Parked outside here.”

“Mine. What’s wrong?”

“No lights, sir.”

“There’s a street lamp.”

“Too far away, sir. Regulations say—”

“Don’t tell me. Want me to move it?”

“If you please, sir.”

“Right. You go back round and choose the spot you’d like me

to occupy. I'll shut this up again and come out of the front door. O.K.?''

"Thank you, sir.''

The worried young face disappeared into the night, Carfax shut the window and pulled the curtain across it. When he turned to look at Boris the latter was still standing in the corner but the gun had disappeared.

"You shouldn't jump to conclusions so quickly,'' Carfax scolded him. "Not in this country. Get what he wanted?''

"Something to do with your car?''

"That's right. Now look. You go and tell that true story to the dining-room lot while I pacify the law. After dinner I want a little chat with you. Colin will arrange it. He knows.''

"What does he know?''

"That I want a chat with you. Do stop arguing, like a good chap, and go into the dining-room or we shall have them all coming out to look for us.''

Boris left the corner and walked across the room behind Carfax. As they reached the door the latter said, "I hope that gun's licensed. Where did you get it?''

"It is licensed,'' Boris answered. "Also it belongs to me from before the war.''

With which surprising statement he walked stiffly across the hall and opened the dining-room door, to be greeted with cries of astonishment and question.

Carfax slipped out of the front door and ran briskly down the steps to his car. The constable was standing beside it.

Chapter Twelve

“What did you mean about that gun of yours?” Carfax asked, an hour later.

Boris told him, simply and truthfully. Stephen had preserved this relic of bygone days, proudly at first and secretly, as he was under age for ownership at the time. Later he had licensed and looked after it in memory of someone he expected never to see again.

“He has this shy, stiff, sentimental attitude, so endearing in the English,” Boris explained, earnestly. “Was it wrong, legally wrong, to give me back my property?”

“I’m not a lawyer,” said Carfax, equally grave. “I wouldn’t know.”

Boris sighed his relief. The dinner had been a protracted torment. Outwardly calm, chatting amiably with Lady Lang on his left and Ann Phillimore on his right, avoiding Louise’s eye opposite, he had felt more shaken inwardly than at any time since the fiasco of his arrival in Higlett Bay. Was he developing a guilty conscience after all these years, he wondered? Why else should he assume that the child in police uniform had come for him? Why lose his head so utterly as to draw a weapon? To shoot the poor young man, or to shoot himself? He really did not know which.

The worst of the situation was the way in which this man, Carfax, handled it. Regardless of any kind of personal danger, more as if he were protecting an aggressive infant from the consequences of an uncontrolled impulse, he had hidden the gun with his own body. He had exposed himself to being shot in place of the police officer. This was profoundly humiliating.

And the whole scene! A parking offence! What could be more futile, more unpolitical, more unemotional, more British? *Enfin*, more civilized? He had never in his life felt so strongly the force of this alien self-confident culture.

Lady Lang found nothing amiss in his behaviour. His manners had always been perfect, she remembered. After all, he was born a gentleman, if a Pole. He had lost nothing vital in the course of

his dreadful experiences, she concluded. She told him about her garden and her dogs and her difficulties with maids.

"I'm not so lucky as Margaret," she said. "There are no Ogdens in my family or in Charles's. Ann won't mind doing everything for herself. The young generation was born to it. It was difficult for me to begin in middle-age."

"That I can believe," he answered, suppressing a vision of Lady Lang, her well-arranged hair beset by steam, her long rope of pearls dangling into a saucepan as she struggled to make a simple dish for Sir Charles. At least, they did not starve, he decided, instantly attacked by visions of those who had done so before his eyes in Siberia, fading from life day by day, diminishing literally and visibly until the morning of their ultimate stillness on the sleeping board or in the snow.

The meal of four well-cooked courses came to an end. Margaret took the women away to the drawing-room and sent Louise to fetch the coffee. The men filled their glasses and Colin said, "Carfax wants a word with you, Sudenic, if you don't mind. I suggest we all join the ladies for coffee and I then take you two off to my study to look at maps or prints or something and leave you there for a bit. You won't take long over it, John?"

"In connection with – the car-parking offence?" Boris asked, as casually as he could.

Stephen laughed. The story had certainly broken the ice after that rather uncomfortable pause when Boris had arrived late in the dining-room, with a white face and frozen explanations. Until John dashed in full of apologies and a well-clowned account of his brush with the law.

Colin looked awkward. Carfax said, quietly to Boris, "As a matter of fact, I asked Colin to arrange for me to meet you."

"Don't you know?" Stephen added, irrepressibly, "John is M.I.5. Ever heard of it?"

Boris had heard of it. He said so. He did not say that he had recognized Carfax from the beginning and that this had added to his anxiety when the policeman arrived. He saw Sir Charles looking at him with a new speculative gaze that did nothing to comfort him.

So after some more conversation and some really excellent coffee and brandy Colin performed his part and Boris found himself alone with British security. The matter of the gun

seemed to be cleared. He had not been asked to give it up. It was not the real object of this conversation. He waited.

"There has been some sort of schemozzle," Carfax said, slowly, "between two groups of our Iron Curtain friends. At least between the king-pin and a satellite. In the street, of all places."

"Did the man die?" Boris asked.

Carfax laughed. He was beginning to like this enigma who had caused so much argument among his superiors.

"No. Was it you chivved him, as they say in our underworld?"

"Do you expect me to answer that?"

"Not really. But you may like to know that they were not able to cope themselves and had to get in outside help and the chap was whisked off to a private nursing-home and a surgeon called in to sew him up. Very hush-hush, but the surgeon was interested. The wounds did not fit the story offered and the patient, who thought he was going to die, expressed a wish for revenge when his political principles were loosened as he came round from the anaesthetic. He suggested that certain Poles were responsible."

"Polish communists were attacked by Russian communists," Boris said.

"Surprising, but so I gathered. It's all rather vague, but the surgeon was interested, as I said. He talked to Scotland Yard and they asked him to collect a sample of the patient's blood. It matched some blood the constable on the beat had the presence of mind to mop up from the pavement at the scene of a scuffle he had noticed from a distance. Nothing at the spot but the blood. Suggestive, isn't it?"

"Very."

"You wouldn't have sent a suit to be cleaned in the last few days, by any chance?"

"No."

Carfax did not pursue this. Instead he said, "You wouldn't care to tell me what you were doing with that bunch? We know you had dinner at Paul's restaurant and four men joined you there."

"I should like to tell you," said Boris. "Then you can make up your mind about the truth of this matter."

"Can I? Won't I just make up my mind the way you want me to?"

"I think you are not so easily influenced."

“Go ahead. Don’t bother about me, one way or the other. What are you doing in this country at all, for a start? Planted, weren’t you?”

“Oh, yes. Let me tell you my own way.”

Boris repeated what he had told the Polish comrades. He described again the Russian clumsiness in imagining he could get into close touch with Colin, simply because, years before, he had been engaged to his wife.

“Could they not imagine that I would be the last man Colin would make a friend? Some men, perhaps, but not Colin. They have theories – correct theories, they call them. Do they never see that theories about people are always wrong or at least half-wrong? Because a man is too complex to become a theory?”

“I know what you mean. Get on with the story.”

“I have nothing to report,” Boris said, simply, “so I report nothing. They are instantly suspicious. They try to kidnap me to the Embassy, perhaps back to Russia.”

“I thought it was something like that. Where do those Polish comrades come into the picture?”

“They want me to work for them, instead.”

“And it isn’t quite the same thing, is it?”

“No.”

They looked at one another, each trying to judge the amount and accuracy of the other’s knowledge.

“Are you going to work for the Poles?” Carfax asked, presently, not expecting an answer.

“Which Poles?”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake!”

“They all want me,” Boris said, with a grin that relieved the tension between them. “I am – popular, isn’t it?”

“Much sought after, yes.”

“Like a girl with a fortune, eh?”

“You couldn’t be less like. What about it, though?”

“If I had decided I would not tell you. But at present I work for no one.”

“Except the Swedes,” said Carfax.

Boris stared, open-mouthed, then he laughed loudly.

“Ericson!” he declared. “I have always wondered. It must be Ericson – no? Oh, then you can help me. I owe this Ericson – let me see – it would be fifty pounds in your money. What I tell you

now is worth fifty pounds, I think. You will pay him for me? I have been worried that I could not pay Ericson.''

"The devil you have!''

Carfax had no ready answer to the proposed bargain. Boris was proving too much for him and he knew it. All this candour, all this truthful revelation had told him precisely nothing. The fellow wasn't a double agent. He was a universal. Had he built it all up as a seaman in the Baltic? It was incredible.

"What d' you expect me to say to that?'' he asked, feebly.

"I expect nothing.'' Boris was very serious. "I never expect anything. But if Ericson is your man—''

"I have not said so.''

"If you pay Ericson my debt I will even tell you what I send to Sweden and how I send it.''

Carfax was tempted but he took hold of himself.

"I'm not in a position to bargain with you, here and now. But I'll arrange an interview for you. In Whitehall. You can give out you've been summoned there for screening again about your permit to stay in this country.''

"Yes. That is possible.'' Boris paused, then went on, reflectively, "I have thought perhaps this is not the country for me to stay. I am stateless, you understand. This makes it difficult.''

"I do understand.''

"Perhaps America would offer a greater opportunity?''

"The U. S., as things stand, would offer a kick in the pants. Don't have any illusions about that. Not with your record.''

"You think so? I have spoken to a kind American, a very rich man. He has Czech ancestry, three generations back.''

He gave a name that made Carfax gasp.

"How in the world did you get in touch with him? Even know he was over here in May.''

"I wrote a letter to America. I remind him that my own family moved to Poland when his moved to the States from the same district in our original homeland. He was very much moved. He wishes to help me.''

"Is this true?''

"He is a sincere man, though very rich.''

"I don't mean that. Is it true about your ancestors, your ancestors and his?''

“I do not tell lies,” said Boris, stiffly. “I believe this to be true.”

Carfax found himself apologizing.

“I have a letter from this friend,” Boris went on, after acknowledging the apology with a grave inclination of his head. “I do not have it with me tonight but I will show you if you wish.”

“Do that,” Carfax said. “As a matter of fact I think we ought to go back to the others now, don’t you? But I would like to see you again, very much. I’ll get in touch.”

“You know my present address?”

“I do.”

Boris looked at him thoughtfully.

“I suppose it is not difficult. A foreigner is always – conspicuous. Everyone will know it too, I suppose?” He made a revealing, weary gesture. “There is no point in moving any more in this city.”

“Not really,” Carfax said. “In fact, to tell you the truth, we’d much rather you’d stay put. My boss gets the jitters if you aren’t located for a day or two. We’re doing our best to look after you. There’d be hell from the Press if anything went wrong. You’re a bit of a favourite with them. They went to town over your spectacular arrival in that snowstorm. Just the sort of thing the British public revels in.”

“I see. But I report to your police every day.”

“You haven’t reported any of your changes of address, have you? They could put you in the nick for that.”

“The—?”

“Nick. Gaol. Prison.”

Boris nodded.

“There are rules here after all,” he said. “Like your parking of cars.”

“Not unlike. But more useful on the whole. I’ll give you a ring in a day or two. Mind you bring that American letter with you when you come.”

“Where shall I come?”

“I’ll tell you when I ring.”

Boris shook his head.

“This is like a spy story. Melodrama. You give me the date and I come to your office in my lunch hour. After all, I am an alien

applying for permanent asylum. I have not withdrawn my application yet. As you said before, there must be formalities.”

“A great many. Very well.” Carfax pulled out a diary. “Unless you hear to the contrary, make it today week.”

Boris worked out the date, had it confirmed by Carfax and stowed it away in his memory.

“Don’t you want to make a note of it?” the latter said, offering to provide paper and pencil.

“I make no written notes,” Boris answered. “I will not forget.”

Chapter Thirteen

No word came from Carfax during the next few days, nor did Boris expect it. The English were not to be hurried and he was aware, too, that he was being looked after even more assiduously than before, though he was not always able to distinguish between friend and foe among these interested individuals. What he did not expect was in the nature of a bombshell, delivered by Sørensen.

The managing director called him into his room one Friday morning and having seated him and offered him a cigarette, he said, "Sudenic, you have given me every satisfaction in your work. Your work is very good indeed. The firm has profited substantially by it."

Anticipating a welcome rise in salary Boris thanked him modestly and waited.

"It is so useful," Sørensen went on, "that the heads of the firm in Stockholm, on my recommendation, propose to transfer you there very shortly. Next week if you can be ready by then."

Boris sat very still. A transfer was impossible. At least, a transfer to Stockholm. Back into those enclosed waters, with the tyrant's hand visible on the horizon, prepared to stretch out and snatch him back. The threat was real enough in England, as he now fully knew. But in Sweden, a neutral country, careful not to offend—

Sørensen had been watching for signs of shock, confusion, even fear in the man on the other side of his desk. He saw none, but he guessed the instant rejection of his offer.

"You don't like this idea?" he asked, quietly.

"I find it – disturbing. I am, you understand, a stateless person."

"Of course you find it disturbing. You have no wish to go east again, even to a country as free as this one, as liberal, perhaps better organized. Certainly better placed to understand the – methods of our neighbours and therefore to give adequate – protection. And ultimately, of course, nationality."

Boris smiled.

“Do you think then, that I need protection?”

“My friend,” said Sørensen, leaning forward, “I know it, I know it well.”

“From whom?”

“Not from me. But from very near you. I cannot say more.”

“You need not,” Boris answered. Sørensen knew nothing of his private life, unless he also had interested persons watching, which was unlikely. Therefore the meaning of his hint was plain, should have been clear from the day he had gone with Margrethe to the international club party in the tennis pavilion and been interrupted in his arranged contact by Scziliekowicz and the general. Why had he not seen this earlier? It explained a good deal.

“I am grateful,” he began again, carefully. “I would like to take this offer, but it is impossible.”

“I don’t understand you.”

Sørensen was clearly put out.

“What plans can you possibly have? Do you think, with your record, the English will give you permanent political asylum?”

“How much do you know of my record?” Boris asked. He was genuinely curious. “What you have read in the newspapers, or what you have been told from – other sources?”

Sørensen might have a list of details from a number of sources, but they proved very little about his real knowledge, Boris decided.

“You think we would engage a man without careful investigation of his past as well as his abilities?” Sørensen blustered on, roused by the apparent reflection on Swedish business methods, competence and care. “That would be strange indeed.”

Boris said nothing. After a long silence the managing director asked, in a calmer voice, “What are these plans you speak of? Are they more than an idea in your own mind?”

“I have English friends,” Boris answered. “I have also friends of my family in America. My plans include the U.S.”

“So.” There was another silence. Then in a changed voice, an urgent, anxious tone, Sørensen said, “You have spoken to no one else of this? You should not speak of it to – anyone.”

“Only to my friends,” said Boris, steadily.

“But do you know who are your friends?”

“I know. But I shall not speak to all of them,” he added, thinking of Louise.

“Then tell no one more. You understand?”

“Perfectly.”

“I have orders to transfer you next week. But I can give you a little longer if necessary. I am to provide for your passage, to supply you with funds for the journey.”

“You are most generous. But I must refuse the offer.”

“Then what can I say to them?” Sørensen began to look piteous, to plead. “I shall be recalled myself! I shall lose my position here! All that I have built up for so many years—”

“No,” said Boris. “It cannot be that I am so important to your firm. I will resign. You can say that I resigned *before* you made the firm’s wishes regarding me. And that afterwards I would not withdraw my resignation.”

“And you? How will you live?”

“I will teach again – for a time. Until my plans are settled.”

“When will that be? These things take time.”

“A year – two years.” Boris smiled. He had already set four weeks as the limit of his stay in England. He had heard nothing from Sørensen to make him wish to change that period.

“Do you imagine you will find this teaching post immediately? What will you live on in the meantime?”

“I live quietly. I have saved a little money.”

“You will receive a full month’s wages from me. That would have been due to you for four weeks’ work following the notice of your resignation. By the action of my firm the four weeks notice is cancelled. The money is due to you.”

He unlocked a drawer, took out a bundle of five-pound notes and began to count them.

“I propose to add a bonus for excellent work,” he said. “You will need it, I think, now that *one* of your sources of income will cease.”

Boris thanked him gravely. He knew now that the man wished him well and he was grateful for it. As he was putting away the money Sørensen said, “They will be sorry to lose you in Sweden. You could have been very useful to my – country.”

“To your firm,” corrected Boris, gently, “I would be happy to be of use. To a country – no. Sweden is not my country. At present I have no country—”

“But in a year or two years – you think you will be an Englishman or an American? You deceive yourself, my friend.”

“I think not,” Boris answered, firmly.

Sørensen held out his hand.

“You will want to visit your bank, no doubt, as early as possible. I accept that your contract ends today. Finish your letters this morning, clear up your desk and you may have this afternoon off. I shall be pleased if you will lunch with me today – to show there is no ill-will.”

“I should be delighted,” Boris answered. “But unfortunately I have an appointment for the lunch-hour. I would like to leave here a little early for that, but I will come back this afternoon to clear up my work. I should not like to leave a muddle and there will not be time to do all this morning.”

“Very well.”

Sørensen was not pleased. He was accustomed to give the orders himself. Somehow Sudenic had conducted the whole of this interview and all of the arrangements, except that unauthorized gift of his which he would have to fiddle through the accounts. However, he had derived pleasure and interest from having the man in his office and on the whole it was probably safer to get him out of the firm now. Both for this branch and for the headquarters in Stockholm.

He shook hands with Boris warmly and wished him well. He watched the tall figure leave his room with a definite regret. He himself had a conference elsewhere that afternoon. He pressed the buzzer on his desk and when Margrethe came in, which she did with her accustomed promptitude, he began at once to dictate to her.

Sørensen left the office an hour later than his staff. He was, by now, feeling out of temper with the world. He felt dissatisfied with his surroundings, wished he were at home, in his summer house on the Baltic, with his yacht moored close inshore. There were six weeks more until he could escape there for his annual holiday with his wife and family.

Outside his office window the sun had been shining in a clear blue sky. In the corridor outside his room some rather tired delphiniums, lupins, spanish iris and scabious stood sharply defined by their indirect lighting. With an oath in his own language Sørensen dragged the plug from the wall and doused

the light. The flowers stood in darkness, the corridor lost its rich, welcoming look. The managing director strode away.

When she came back from her lunch five minutes later, Margrethe was horrified, suspected a burnt fuse and sent for the electrician. He came, replaced the plug and departed again without saying anything, concluding, not for the first time, that foreigners, even gorgeous female ones, were scatty and there was no point in telling them so.

Boris went first to his bank, which was a branch conveniently near the office, and afterwards to a public call box. He had some difficulty in getting through to Carfax, but at last a familiar voice took over from the series of obtuse girls and men who had handed him about among them. Carfax was surprised, but said Boris could come at once and he would try to make the visit a combined one.

When Boris arrived in that part of Whitehall where Carfax had his office he found three men waiting for him, Carfax himself and two others, both older, both treated by the younger man with respect, but not deference. This quality, Boris suspected, was not a conspicuous part of the man's make-up.

He was asked to account for his wish to see them with so little notice. He described his talk with Sørensen, explaining that he felt unable to take the Swede's offer. The three men took his explanation without comment of any kind, though Carfax wrote a few words on a slip of paper and passed it to the senior of the other two.

Boris was then asked to repeat what he had already said in the Brentwoods' house. He did so, very briefly, neither altering nor adding anything at all. When he had finished one of the senior men said, "You've managed to stir up rather an unusual amount of trouble, both for yourself and us, in a very short space of time, Mr. Sudenic."

"I am sorry," Boris answered, "for your inconvenience. But I do not apologize. The trouble, as you call it, is not from me. Too many people interest themselves in my affairs."

"You can hardly blame them," said the other senior man, mildly.

"I blame them," retorted Boris, "and I am surprised. My countrymen who live here – they have no political importance, but they do not accept this."

"It might be said equally well of you, yourself," suggested Carfax. "You also are an exile, though as an agent of undecided allegiance you are rather exceptional."

"Well put, John," said the first man. He turned briskly to Boris. "Now, Mr. Sudenic, I will speak bluntly. We don't know exactly what part you took in that little brush near Paddington and we don't very much care. But we don't intend to have inter-Iron-Curtain feuds disturbing the Queen's Peace in this country. In other words we are not going to accept you as a permanent resident."

"That I did not expect," said Boris, not at all moved by the ultimatum.

"On the other hand," said the second senior, "we have no intention of throwing you to the wolves. Up to a point you've solved a number of puzzles that've stumped us so far."

"*I* have?" asked Boris, genuinely surprised.

"Yes, *you*. Unintentionally, I have no doubt. That must be a new experience for you."

As Boris made no answer to this, he went on, "Up to a point we would like to help you, since you have been of assistance to us."

Boris finished considering the situation.

"You have checked with Ericson," he said. "Now I understand." He smiled suddenly. "There is the little matter of —"

"Fifty quid," said Carfax. "It will be taken care of."

"Thank you."

"We will help you," went on the senior man, quite as if there had been no interruption, "provided you guarantee not to get into any more brawls; not to concern yourself with passing information and so on, to or with any of your dubious contacts, before you leave this country. Where d'you intend to go?"

The question came with no alteration in the tone of voice and no preceding pause. But Boris had been interrogated far too often, in similarly comfortable, as well as in brutal circumstances, to be caught by it.

"I have told Mr. Carfax," he said at once, with a candid look in John's direction. "I, too, think England is perhaps too – populated – too crowded – for me. I have friends I write to in America."

"Yes. Your U.S. friend agrees he is trying to help you. But he is very doubtful if he will succeed."

"He is very rich. That means power in America."

"Perhaps not to the extent needed in your case. We think, Mr. Sudenic, that you must not rely on this, but think of alternatives. Your present permit lasts until the middle of August. It will not be renewed. You must be prepared to leave the country by then."

"Oh yes," agreed Boris. "I must leave before August."

The others exchanged glances.

"I imagine you have given fairly short notice at Sørensen's?" Carfax suggested.

"Sørensen's." Boris reflected, then spoke. "Yes, I resign today as I told you. Today, I finish." He got to his feet, smiling all round and holding out his hand to the senior man. "You will forgive me. I have to return to arrange my papers at the office. Also I have not yet eaten."

They all shook hands with him. A secretary appeared to show him out.

"Well, I'm damned!" Carfax said, as the door closed behind him.

The senior man picked up the telephone receiver and dialled a number on the outside line.

Boris walked out into the sunshine, wondering if his last piece of near-boasting had been an indiscretion or would have the desired effect. He could not tell, so it was no use worrying.

It was not until he had nearly reached Wellington Place that he began to worry and that not on account of his recent interview. Happening to look back as he passed the Underground entrance in Trafalgar Square he saw emerging from it a figure he recognized. The man's face was turned away from him, staring at the on-coming traffic. Though he moved to the kerb at a pedestrian crossing, he made no attempt to use it. Before he turned his head in Boris's direction the latter moved on again.

But he knew he had been seen as he passed the Underground entrance and he guessed what was likely to follow. His only hope lay in reaching Stephen's club near Wellington Place before the trap was sprung. Therefore, until he reached it, he must continue at the same pace, as if his intention was to cross

into the Haymarket or Lower Regent Street.

It was a nerve-racking hundred yards. There were no shop-windows beside him or opposite to mirror the passers-by behind him. Tall, solid buildings on the shady side of the street, with, at this hour, very few people on the pavement. The crowds, such as they were, would be in St. James's Park on the grass or in deck-chairs. The tourists with their cameras would be drifting down the Mall towards Buckingham Palace. He felt very much alone and thoroughly frightened.

At last he drew level with the steps of the club. He shot up them at speed, not daring to look back until he had passed the door and announced to the porter that Commander Lang was expecting him. Then, turning, he looked out through the glass door. Three men had come together on the pavement outside; one of them was the individual he had recognized. A car drew up beside them; they got in and drove away.

Stephen greeted Boris impatiently.

"You've been a hell of a time," he said. "What's cooking?"

Boris told him the unexpected news from Sørensen's, and said he felt he had to see Carfax in consequence. There was no time to ring him up; he had to go to Whitehall immediately. Nothing was settled, but he did not expect that.

"I bet they don't want you to stay here," Stephen said, complacently.

"You are not complimentary, but that is true."

"Obvious. A cuckoo in the nest. Everything you do and say is far too definite for our present rulers. They are walking on a tightrope and only making themselves unpopular for it."

"A tightrope is quite safe if you have the skill. Besides, I am in favour of compromise. It is not natural to me, but I have learned its value."

"The hard way," said Stephen, becoming serious.

"As you say. Let us not talk of my interview – especially not here. This place should be filled by none but loyal men, only one can never be sure."

"Careful," said Stephen. "I wouldn't like to have to dot you one as you're my guest, but there are some things you can't say, even to me."

Boris sighed. Sometimes Stephen's immaturity made him sad.

"I will tell you what has just happened as I arrive here," he

said. “It will amuse you.”

On the contrary, it gave Stephen much concern. He began to talk about police protection, about driving the enemy into the open and exposing him, about arranging a counter-ambush.

“No use,” said Boris. “I have promise to have no – brawls they called it. Listen, Stephen. Are you free this afternoon? And have you a car here?”

“Answer to both in the affirmative.”

“Then I will explain.”

The outcome of this was that Stephen drove Boris to the offices of the Baltic Trading Company and being lucky enough to find a free parking meter was able to leave the car and go back to wait for him. The two hours were nearly up and Stephen’s patience almost exhausted by the time Boris rejoined him.

“If you’d been any later I’d have had to drive round and perhaps lose the meter by the time I got back to it.”

“I am sorry. My colleagues interrupt me to say good-bye. Mr. Sørensen’s secretary, Margrethe Olsen—”

“The ash-blonde?”

“Pale gold, not ash. That is grey. We arrange a river trip on the Thames. For Sunday afternoon. She is sad that I go.”

“Now, now,” Stephen admonished. “None of this Casanova stuff. Ann, Louise, now Margrethe—”

“But no,” said Boris, very seriously, as they drove away. “I am not Casanova. I like women – almost all women – very, very much. But I love only one at a time. At present it is Louise.”

“You’re hopeless!” Stephen laughed. “Where to, now? I promised to pick up Ann about this time.” He glanced at his watch. “Christ, yes! I’m late.”

“May I come with you?” Boris asked. “To explain why I keep you. I must talk to you, Stephen – and to Ann. It is for my future, a plan I make. Will she be angry if I come with you? I think there is not much time for me.”

“Of course she won’t. We can all go to her place. None of your would be kidnappers know where Ann hangs out, surely?”

“I hope not. If it was not – urgent—”

“Urgent, my foot! And you going to lounge about in a punt all Sunday afternoon!”

Boris laughed, but somehow Stephen thought, puzzled, there was a hollow sound to it. He was beginning to feel uneasy about

Boris. He was a splendid chap, of course, but some of the things he said went too near the bone. He didn't want Ann mixed up in anything risky. Perhaps Boris was going to turn out a bit of a liability, after all. He seemed to know such very extraordinary people.

Ann, pleased to see them both, showed signs of no such misgivings. But she took Boris's predicament very seriously.

"We'll have to look after you," she said. "Obviously it isn't safe for you to be around alone."

"Will they try something again?" Stephen asked, frowning. "Surely not at once?"

"Who can say? It may be tomorrow – the next day – anytime."

"Will you be working tomorrow?" Ann asked. "Steve has to go back to Portsmouth. Don't you, darling?"

He nodded, foreseeing what would follow.

"Well, I've promised to go to my people for the week-end. It's not too far from London, in the Chilterns, beyond High Wycombe. Will you come down with me for lunch and tea? I can drive you down and put you on a train to come back. Do say yes."

"I shall be pleased and honoured," Boris answered.

"Then I'll pick you up from your flat about eleven. Unless you'll be at your office."

"No. I leave Sørensen's today."

"That's all right, then. Have we got your address?"

"Stephen has it."

"And now," the latter said, rather irritably, "perhaps you'll let Boris tell us what he came here to explain. His plans for how and when he can leave this country."

"Oh!" said Ann, delightedly. But looking from one to the other of their solemn faces, held her peace and let them get on with it.

Chapter Fourteen

The next morning, with all due protocol and the heavy cynicism so characteristic of their usual approach, the Soviet Government, through its embassy in Britain, demanded the extradition of a former seaman, now living in London, for the crime of theft from a Russian trawler while she was anchored during bad weather in Higlett Bay off the Yorkshire coast.

The name of Boris Sudenic being already familiar, the request took a fairly rapid upward flight, gathering Colin on its way because after all it was he who saw the fellow directly he had landed.

"Find anything valuable on him when he landed?" Colin was asked, and could only shake his head and declare, not for the first time, that the man had been soaked to the skin, had been attended by his own man, Ogden, and that if Ogden had seen anything unusual that Sudenic was carrying he would have noticed it when he helped him to strip and dress again in borrowed clothes. Also Ogden would have been certain to report it.

"What's he supposed to have pinched, anyway?" Colin demanded.

"Money, it says, in British currency. And weapons, unspecified."

"*British* currency? That's a bit fishy, isn't it? Bit of a giveaway on their part?"

"Not particularly. The skipper might be carrying foreign currency of several kinds for use in refuelling, buying necessary stores and so on."

"I thought trawlers were supplied by a mother ship that sits among them at sea while they fish and observes our radar or whatever it is they do."

"So they are. The whole thing is bogus, of course. They intend to have him or at any rate put every obstacle in our way to granting him asylum. If they had any conception of the British character they would have known this would have an exactly opposite effect."

"Well, as far as I know he is not a thief, whatever else he is."

"Keep it under your hat at present."

"Will the Russians?"

"Who can say? It won't help them to give it to the Press, but it's quite on the cards."

"Shouldn't he be warned?"

"I imagine he has been already."

Colin was worried by this conversation. He wanted Boris to hear what had happened because it might induce the man to go away. The longer he stayed in England the worse it would be for Margaret and himself. They had patched up their lamentable quarrel; they had avoided another outbreak. But this kind of truce was more damnable than an open fight. He would have to tell Margaret, sooner or later, because if anything happened to Boris and she discovered that he had done nothing to help him he would be lost for ever as far as she was concerned.

Having tortured himself to no purpose for a couple of hours Colin rang up John Carfax and put his problem, or rather the part of it relating to Boris, before him.

"Not to worry," John answered, in his usual cheerful voice. "I gave him the bare facts earlier today."

"That's all right, then. I've been told to keep my mouth shut, but Margaret—You know how things leak—We're due at the garden-party this afternoon."

"You're pushing on up, aren't you?" Carfax said, admiringly. "When's the C. B.E. coming along? Christmas?"

"Never, probably," Colin said, with a despairing note in his voice, "if this chap Sudenic goes on getting under my feet. He's tripped me up more than once, already."

"He's a very single-minded bugger," Carfax said, "as you or I might be in his place."

"I don't want him to come to any *harm*," Colin said, desperately.

The Russian demand had cleared his mind about Boris to a considerable extent. The issue was really between himself and Margaret and that did not concern John at all.

"He's resourceful, too," said Carfax. "If Margaret hears and gets – upset – tell her to keep in touch with *me*. That'll let you out, won't it?"

"Thank you," said Colin, stiffly.

Meanwhile Boris, waiting for Ann to pick him up, had plenty of time to consider what Carfax had told him, very briefly, of the Russian intention. The request, of course, had no validity at all. He was not a Soviet citizen, he had stolen nothing. They themselves had provided the initial British currency. There was no extradition treaty between Britain and the U.S.S.R.

So it meant something quite different from its face value, this request. It was a cover for whatever might happen next.

If this had been all the news that came to him that morning, Boris would have been, for him, distinctly depressed. But he had also received a letter, forwarded on to him from his previous address by the Post Office, whose form he had filled in the day after he moved. This letter changed everything, perhaps. His excitement was growing. When he opened his door to Ann she saw at once that something had happened.

"Boris!" she exclaimed. "Have you got engaged or something?"

"Not engaged," he said, laughing so wildly she wondered if he had been drinking. "No. But I have a letter today from a friend – a very, very old friend. He is ill in hospital."

"Honestly!" Ann was shocked. "You look as if you'd come into a fortune and it's a poor wretched friend who is ill."

"It may be a great fortune," said Boris, instantly sober.

"I don't understand you."

He moved away from the door, not inviting her to go in, picked up his raincoat, which he always carried and turning her gently, moved outside his flat, shutting the door behind him. They took the lift in silence, he got into her car beside her, still without speaking. But as they moved away he said, "Ann, it is of the greatest possible importance that I see this sick friend of mine at once. Today. He is at a hospital near – Reading. If you could take me as near as possible and make my excuses to Admiral and Mrs. Phillimore—"

"Don't be silly," Ann answered, calmly. "Reading isn't much out of our way. We'll go there first. If your friend is ill you won't be allowed to stay long. We can easily do it and get home in time for lunch."

"You are good and clever as well as very beautiful," said Boris, fervently, with such conviction that Ann felt it was not at all conceited of her to agree with him.

At the hospital, where Ann dropped him before going off to shop in the neighbourhood, Boris had difficulty at first in reaching his friend. Visiting hours were in the afternoon, three times a week, and every evening for close relatives of the patient. Never in the morning.

"But I come from London," Boris explained. "I get this letter only today, so I come at once."

The porter was inclined to be sympathetic. Poor bloody foreigners, speaking like little kids, engaged his pity. He directed Boris to the right ward, advising him to ask for Sister Hood and put his case to her.

The Sister was young, Irish and warm-hearted. She explained that the patient had undergone a very serious operation and for a time was not expected to live. He was now improving rapidly and was due to leave the hospital in about ten days' time.

"He will then be well?" asked Boris. "Completely well?" The letter had been despairing.

Sister Hood considered.

"You had better have a word with Dr. Subandarah. He is the registrar. He is in the ward now. Wait here and I'll see if he will come and speak to you."

Dr. Subandarah appeared through the swing doors of the ward. He was a small, slight, pale brown Indian. He looked up into Boris's face with compassion in his dark eyes.

"What relation have you to the patient, please?"

"He was in my father's service in Poland," Boris answered, carefully. "He looked after the horses." As Dr. Subandarah said nothing, Boris went on, "I was in the Polish army and then a prisoner of the Russians. I know that my parents were killed but never how this happen. Perhaps Sergei can tell me."

"You are interested in what he can tell, not in the man himself? He is a very sick man."

"I am sorry. Naturally I am interested in Sergei – in all my people. You will let me see him? I come from London. I have little time."

He controlled his impatience with difficulty.

"I will let you see him for ten minutes. It is irregular but I understand your circumstances. The surgeon who performed the operation will be here at any moment. So ten minutes only."

"Thank you."

Dr. Subandarah disappeared again through the swing doors. Sister Hood said, kindly, “Follow me,” and Boris found himself inside the ward, walking between ranks of beds, some curtained, with nurses and trolleys glimpsed inside the screens, some open, with men of all ages propped against pillows, sleeping, reading, or merely staring in front of them.

Sister Hood came to a closely curtained cubicle and stood aside for Boris to enter.

“I’ll come for you when your time’s up,” she said.

Boris bowed his thanks, his eyes on the figure in the bed. It was indeed Sergei, much older, very thin and pale, a mere shadow of the man who had helped to keep his father’s stable, ruled over three lads and ten fine horses. But Sergei himself, the first familiar figure he had met for twenty years.

With tears running freely down his face Boris stepped up to the bed, clasped the man’s thin hand in both of his and began to pour out his sorrows, his long saga of distress, betrayal, hardship and grief, in the language of his youth, in the manner he had used as a boy, when, suffering from a supposed injustice, he had found refuge in the stables with this same friend.

“And you, Sergei? Tell me what happened! I have heard terrible things. You did not have a part in them or you would not have written to me.”

“What have you heard, my master?”

“That my father’s peasants rose and murdered him and all of my family.”

“That is a lie. There were a few, corrupted by the communists. They were put up as leaders afterwards. It was the Russian commissar who ordered the – execution.”

“Go on. Tell me. I must know at last.”

The pitiful commonplace tale was soon told. It had made no difference that the Sudenic estate was well-run, prospered; that the peasants enjoyed privileges not found on all such estates; that they liked and respected the count and his family. Dogma was supreme. Theory ruled. Peasants were all oppressed. Landowners were all evil.

“How did you escape? Did many escape?” Boris asked, to stop the tale that had become a lamentation.

Sergei had gathered together a small band of like-thinking men from among the personal staff of the murdered family.

They knew that they had narrowly escaped the same fate and that they must act soon. They were helped by the confusion of the German advance. All the horses had been commandeered but many were still being used on the estate. They took these one night and fled, losing three of their number in the alarm that was instantly raised and two more in an ambush the next day. The rest got through to Rumania.

"And then?"

"The Germans caught up on us, too. But I escaped again to Greece."

"Like many others," Boris nodded, thinking of Sczliekowicz.

"I joined a ship, knowing nothing. I spoke German by then, but it was of no help in Greece. The boat was a fishing vessel. It was blown up by a mine, but I was taken from the sea by the English from a warship. I came to England. I still work on boats, English trading ships. My wife works in a factory in Reading, so I live there when I am ashore."

"Your wife—Then Maria escaped also?"

Sergei turned away his face.

"She died," he said, in a muffled voice. "In the first winter before the Germans came. This wife is English; her name is Elsie."

"You have children?"

"Two sons. They are completely English."

For the first time they smiled at each other.

"I am so glad, Sergei, that you have found happiness and work in this country. It is a good country for exiles."

"I think so now. At first I wanted only to go to America. There are so many Poles there and certain great advantages. But now I am content to finish my life here."

"That will not be for a long time. The Sister told me you have made a splendid recovery."

Sergei shook his head.

"They never tell the whole truth. I have not said this to my wife or to anyone. But I can say it to you, my master. I think I have a cancer and that it cannot be cured."

Boris again took the man's hand and held it closely.

"Is this why you wrote to me?"

"Partly. I read of your arrival in the newspaper but I did not at first believe it could be you. I heard you had been killed in

battle. It was another of their lies. Then I heard – other things – that I did not believe."

"They, too, were lies."

"I knew that. But I hesitated, in case you were not my Count Sudenic after all and for fear – of recalling too much – or of seeming to impose—"

"No," said Boris, "none of that now, Sergei. I hope to God you're wrong about yourself, but if not, believe me that I will do everything in my power for your wife and sons."

"I am not asking for favours," said Sergei, stiffly.

"But I am," Boris told him. "I need your help, Sergei, more than I ever needed help in my life before. I am asking you for a favour and not ashamed to do it."

Sergei drew himself up, smiling.

"In ten days they will let me out of here," he said.

"Then in ten days, or perhaps before that, I will get in touch with you again."

The curtains parted and Sister Hood came into the cubicle.

"Time for you two to stop nattering," she said, briskly. "Come away with you now, Mr. Sudenic. You've been exciting my patient, I can see that."

On the way down the ward, she said, "Mr. Colehill, that's the surgeon, would like a word with you in my room before you go."

Mr. Colehill shook hands with Boris, eyeing him curiously.

"Are you the chap who swam ashore in February up in Yorkshire?" he asked.

"It was a raft," answered Boris, laughing, "but very wet, all the same."

"I bet it was. Now about Voliniak. What is your position with regard to him. Relative, friend, what?"

Boris explained.

"Right," said Mr. Colehill. "You're prepared to take some responsibility in his case, I imagine?"

"Anything I can possibly do. But I may not remain long in England."

"He won't have long, poor fellow."

Mr. Colehill explained.

"He knows," Boris said, quietly. "He told me the same, himself."

"Who told *him*?" Mr. Colehill was angry.

"He guessed. No one has told him. He will not tell his wife. Or not yet."

"I don't think you understand the position—"

"I understand the *whole* of the position," Boris said, holding out his hand in farewell. "I thank you for your frankness. I will do all I can. And now you must excuse me. I am to be picked up here for luncheon with friends."

He bowed and went out, leaving the surgeon considerably puzzled. Sister Hood joined him.

"Who does that chap think he is?" he asked her.

"The Pole? Voliniak says he's a count in his own country."

"They're all counts or princes or used to be, rather. None of that in Poland today. All the same he has quite an impressive manner, don't you think?"

"He has a naughty eye on him," Sister Hood said, smiling in recollection.

Boris found Ann waiting patiently in her car at the front door of the hospital. As they drove along to her parents' home he told her about Sergei Voliniak's adventures. But he said nothing about his illness or its probable outcome. He suggested too that the subject was not likely to interest Admiral and Mrs. Phillimore.

Ann took the hint. The conversation at lunch was chiefly of the sea, with the admiral and Boris exchanging their very dissimilar experiences. Afterwards Mrs. Phillimore led them all into the garden where they spent a pleasant lazy afternoon under the trees until Boris decided that it was time for him to catch a train back to London.

Though the Chiltems that afternoon had enjoyed uninterrupted pleasant sunshine and a cool breeze, the Buckingham Palace garden party had seen London in its most disagreable summer conditions. Under a dull sky a dry hot wind snatched at the women's hats and wrapped their thin dresses tightly round their knees. It blew dust into everyone's eyes and destroyed everyone's temper. Movement became a battle; conversation a tedious lament. Interest quickened along the route of the royal progress but faded quickly. When at last it was over, the well-dressed but windswept guests flocked out into the Mall and Buckingham Gate, seeking the shelter of their cars or

of taxis, or, if they were of sufficient importance, were driven out from within by their own chauffeurs in their own Rolls Royces.

Colin and Margaret were lucky enough to secure a taxi after a walk of less than a hundred yards. Though they had seen a number of their friends they considered the afternoon had been a disappointing bore.

"Too many there," Colin said, gloomily. "They invite too many at a time."

"I suppose they have to get through the list," Margaret said. She had pushed off her shoes, removed her gloves and her hat and was leaning back in a corner of the taxi, slowly recovering.

"Don't know why they have to do it on this scale," Colin persisted. "No one really enjoys it."

"The climbers do. On a reasonable day it would be delightful," Margaret said, but without enthusiasm.

"When is the weather in this country ever reasonable?" Colin asked.

"It never suits everyone."

"You mean we always grumble?"

"Don't we?"

"Would you rather we'd refused the invitation?"

"Don't be silly. We couldn't do that."

"There you are, then."

The unprofitable conversation lapsed. The taxi brought them to their home. Margaret went straight in while Colin paid the driver. He found her standing in the hall with a white face, holding the evening newspaper in her hand.

"Boris!" she said, in a voice that broke on his name.

Colin took the paper from her and read. A brief account of the Russian demand, obviously put out by the Communists. A sharp attack on the government for not granting full asylum without delay to all persecuted aliens. A photograph, four months out of date, of Boris, in his beard and his seaman's jersey.

"I suppose that's the only picture they've got of him," Colin said, frowning. "Odd, that."

"What does it matter?" Margaret cried, exasperated. "Is that all you can say? A silly remark about a photograph?"

"You don't understand." Colin swept her protest away, entirely unaffected by it, she noticed with surprise. "I said that

because it suggests the Press have not bothered about him particularly up to now. No reason why they should, but interesting. I hope they take their time tracing him. We don't want them falling over our feet."

Margaret stared at him in astonishment.

"I can't think what you're talking about," she said.

"It doesn't matter." Colin began to move towards his study.

"What are you going to do?"

"Ring up John for a start. He said he was going straight home."

She followed him into the room, shutting the door behind her.

"Why?"

He turned to look at her, having dialled the number, the receiver at his ear.

"Why – what?"

"You want the Russians to get him! You want to help them – to get him out of the country! You've always hated him and for no reason at all!"

Colin did not answer. He was speaking to Carfax, or rather listening, occasionally saying yes or no. When he put down the receiver he looked at his wife, so coldly that for perhaps the first time in the course of their marriage she was afraid of him.

"You are quite ludicrously wrong," he said. "I know for a fact that Sudenic has no intention of staying in England and never has had. But if he had wanted to stay I would not have opposed it. As far as I am concerned he can go where he likes, but not back to Russia. That would be the end of him. Ring up John yourself if you don't believe me."

He moved away from his desk, holding out the receiver to her. She went forward, taking it, but making no attempt to dial.

"It's time you sorted out your ideas, Margaret," Colin went on, still moving away from her. "You're out of date. I'm not jealous of Sudenic, now. You are. I know all about his affair with Louise, or rather all he's told Stephen about it, because Steve has told me. I still don't like him, but I shall do everything I can to help him, if only to score off the bloody Russians. So you'd better stop making a fool of yourself, if you can."

Without looking at her he walked out of the room, shutting the door quietly behind him. Margaret laid her head on his desk among the shattered pieces of her own past image and wept

bitterly, while the telephone buzzed gently in her hand, waiting to be of service.

Chapter Fifteen

Boris woke early on sunday morning. He had not slept well, for he too had seen the evening papers and the Press publicity given to his case worried him. Also the apparent lack of interest shown by the authorities. He had never really understood the peculiar balance in England between the ordinary police and the security forces. Were they really the same? Did they overlap? Was there some truly sinister third body he had not yet encountered, one that would pounce when he least expected it?

Almost, he felt, it was easier in the Iron Curtain countries, because there you knew what to expect. Authority was the enemy of freedom, openly, ideologically, fanatically. There was something definite to fight, to trick, to elude. Something immensely powerful but often self-defeating for that reason. Here in England freedom was apparently unrestricted, but from time to time you fell over the barbed wire of some hidden, crazily constructed obstacle to freedom. This made his present situation more difficult than ever.

He woke early, then, his mind heavy with unanswered questions, his head aching from unrest. He glanced again at the evening papers of the day before. They told him nothing. His uncouth self of February looked at him from a hirsute face. But as he lay in his bath an idea came to him, or rather the development of a previous idea and later, reading the Sunday papers while he passed his electric razor slowly over his jaw, the idea moved further and grew firm and pleased him. A new plan, he thought. I must find Stephen tonight and scrap everything we discussed on Friday and talk to him of this. He remembered ruefully that the best part of the day had to be spent with Margrethe on the river. He hoped she would not be difficult. He had never encouraged her but he knew what lay under the frozen exterior of this ice-maiden.

He had arranged to meet Margrethe at the railway station at Marlow at noon. She had insisted upon bringing a picnic lunch for them both, so he thought it appropriate to carry with him a small bottle of spirits as his share of the provisions. Apart from

anything else it made a convenient bulge of indeterminate size in the pocket of his blazer, so the other contents were not defined.

Margrethe was already there waiting for him. This was to be expected, since she had told him that she was spending the week-end with friends at Peppard. She was, however, alone.

"You do not bring your friends?" Boris asked her as they left the station entrance.

"No. They are lazy today and the river is too familiar to them."

He said no more. But when Margrethe reached a bus stop and stood by it, he asked, "Where are we going? Are there no boats at Marlow?"

"Hundreds," she answered. "Far too many. My friends have told me of a small place between here and Henley where it would be possible to hire a boat. They are difficult to get, you know, at this time of the year. They rang up this place and the boat is reserved."

"That's fine," said Boris, lightly. He had expected something of the sort.

The bus arrived, they travelled some distance and got down where a small lane led off towards the north bank of the river.

When they saw the water in the distance Margrethe said, "The boathouse is where you see those roofs just ahead. If you like to go down to the bank from here and find a good place for our lunch I will bring the boat."

"By yourself?"

"Why not? I understand boats. In Sweden—"

"River boats? What will it be?"

"A punt. You know what that is?"

Boris remembered days on the river with Margaret. A large party in three punts. A single day after they were engaged, the punt drawn in under the willows with the pole upright in the mud on the outer side to hold the boat firm. So long ago, so different from now—

"What are you thinking?" Margrethe demanded.

"Of a punt. Years ago, when I was very young. You know how to throw the pole? It is not easy."

"I use the paddle."

"Oh yes, the paddle. Bring two paddles, then I can help you."

She left him, walking away towards the houses where the small lane seemed to end. Boris found a stile, crossed it into a rough field and came to the river-bank, lined with a row of willows.

He stood for a time looking at the water and then up and down stream. From where he was he could not see the boat-house, for it was hidden by a bend in the river. But in the opposite direction, not more than a hundred yards away, there was a lock with a weir beside it, protected by a low-slung chain.

It was all very familiar, so familiar that he allowed his thoughts to go back more freely than ever before to his earlier sojourn in this quiet country and to all that the visit had brought him, all he had lost. He found that now he regretted nothing of that time. He would never really have belonged in this land.

He looked down again at the water. It was moving sluggishly near the bank, but a few yards out the current was quite noticeable, helped by the wind, which was making little ripples on the surface. The lock, he saw, was on the south bank. If they were to go downstream they would have to cross over to reach it. With this wind and the current so swift—

He walked upstream a short distance, intending to move round the bend and see if he could find a more suitable spot for mooring. But before he had gone more than a few yards he saw the nose of a punt appearing and there was Margrethe, close to the bank, paddling gracefully and bending her head from time to time to avoid the overhanging branches of the willows.

She shouted gaily, "Here I am! Where do I come in?"

"It would be better the other way," he called. "Let me get in the boat and we will go back upstream."

But she had already drawn level and was sliding past him.

"After lunch," she said. "Now I am hungry."

He followed, moving back the way he had come. Margrethe passed the spot where he had stood. He began to run, calling to her, "Stop, stop! We are too close to the fall. It will be hard work to go back."

He saw the punt dive in towards the bank and disappear behind the branches of a large tree that grew out over the water. In a few seconds he was on the bank waiting to make fast the punt to a root.

But Margrethe did not bring it farther in. Instead she backed

off a little.

"This is so dark," she said. "And muddy. I want to bathe."

"You can't bathe here. It would not be safe."

"Why not?"

He saw her eyes go past him, narrow and harden. He leaped for the strong willow branch thrusting out over the river.

He was only just in time. The heavy body of a man shot under his legs and into the water, propelled by the force which had been intended for his own back. As his feet swung down again they caught his assailant's emerging head a crack that sent him under once more, this time beneath the punt, now rocking violently a little farther from the shore.

In the punt Margrethe reached for her handbag. Boris let go his hold on the branch and dropped into the stream as a bullet tore into the leaves at the spot he had just left.

Under water he could see nothing. He was half buried in mud, not daring to come up while his breath lasted. But thrusting out his hands in all directions he felt the side of the punt. He pushed; it moved; he flung himself after it, churning up more mud. But the water was immediately deeper, so he knew the bank was behind him.

When he had to breathe he surfaced with a great effort, drew breath and sank again immediately. But this time he did not follow the punt; he groped under water to the bank and found a root among the loose rubbish, branches, rotten logs and occasional sharp tins and rolling bottles. He followed the root the way it thickened and put his face up again for more air.

He found he was peering from directly below the tree that had saved him. Out in the river was the punt, moving quickly now downstream. Margrethe was leaning over the side towards him and he saw a dark head in the water and two hands clasping the side of the punt,

She was trying to get the man in, but there would not be time. The only thing she could do, the only chance she had for them both, unless they were very good swimmers, was to let him hold on and try herself to paddle across to the lock. That was their only chance.

Boris pulled himself slowly out of the water. The two were occupied solely with themselves. They had no thought for him now. Probably Margrethe considered she had disposed of him.

He did not shout his instructions, his warning. He sat on the bank and watched.

There were boats in the lock, which was filling and a number that had come down, as they should, near the other bank and were strung along the far shore waiting for the gates to open. Voices and laughter came distantly from these boats and faint music from transistor radios. No one appeared to notice the silent struggle going on in mid-stream, where the man still tried to heave himself from the water and Margrethe still tried to pull him up.

With a mighty struggle the man at last got a shoulder over the side of the punt, which instantly heeled so that water poured over its shallow freeboard. Margrethe flung herself to the other side, the man got a knee up, strained, rolled back a little, strained again and was in, lying gasping on the floor-boards, while the punt still rocked and Margrethe, crouching, trying to steady the craft, clambered away to take control again.

Boris watched. He had seen the paddle fall overboard when the punt heeled. He now saw Margrethe search about, he heard her frantic cry to the man to rouse himself. Was it beneath him? Hurry, hurry, they were drifting dangerously. Hurry!

The man moved, slowly, because he was exhausted, waterlogged, unused to boats. There was no paddle. Margrethe began to cry for help.

But at that moment the lock gates opened and a crowd of boats emerged, power launches revving up to travel-speed, rowing boats, punts, canoes, all filled with laughing, shouting, singing crowds. More radios, guitars thrumming, accordions bleating. Margrethe's thin cries went unheard until too late.

It was a small inquisitive boy at the lock, eager to understand its mechanism, who walked across the bridge where the sluice gates were operated and happening to look away to the weir saw the punt and heard the cries. He ran to the lock keeper and persuaded him to look. They saw the punt drive head-on at the chain, turn sideways, slew round, tipping out its passengers, and then, after another turn, slip under and shoot down the weir.

The boy stood transfixed. He saw the punt, its greater weight driving it faster than the woman, catch her up, ram her unconscious and slither on into the tossing froth below, from which it presently emerged upside-down, floating peacefully

forward.

The lock keeper shouted orders, snatched up a life-buoy and ran for the lower river bank. He leaped into the nearest rowing boat, seized the sculls from an astonished young man and pulled out into the river.

The man with Margrethe had snatched at the chain as once more he was thrown into the water. He clung to it as he had clung to the side of the punt, until his arms would no longer hold his face above water. The lock keeper shouted, "Let go!" The cry was taken up by the horror-struck crowd, themselves working to keep their craft in safety while at the same time preserving their ringside view of the event.

But the man held on while he drowned. Only when his life was fading did his grip relax and his limp body shoot down into the turmoil below the weir.

Boris watched, sitting motionless under the concealing branches of the tree in the deep shade of the willows. When the crowd of boats above the lock moved slowly away, the radios switched off, the guitars silent, he slipped back into the sunshine, spread his soaked blazer on the grass, took off his dripping shirt and spread that too. He had not intended to bathe and had no trunks with him. It would be dangerous in this puritan country, he thought, to be seen naked. At all costs he must avoid publicity. So he had to lower himself into the water again to wash the mud from his flannels. Afterwards he went back to the sun and lay down.

He was shivering now, from cold, delayed shock and present fear. He had seen the boat capsize and the pair go over. He did not know what had happened to them. But he knew that this was the fate they had intended for him. He knew that Margrethe, as he had begun to suspect, was yet another enemy, whatever she might once have been. He saw now the point of the Russian move to secure Press publicity for him. It was to prepare the way for his death, an apparent suicide. Kidnapping had failed – twice. British security had been alerted. Only assassination was left and secret assassination at that.

He looked at his watch. It was waterproof and was still ticking. Only just after one. The whole dreadful sequence had taken no more than twenty minutes. He groped in the pocket of his blazer. The gun would be useless but the flask promised

relief.

When he had taken a long pull he lay down again, turning his back now to the sun, his head on his arms, his eyes commanding all views of the narrow field, its hedge, the stile, the telegraph poles along the lane beyond. There was only one way out of this place, the way he had come in. Except along the edge of the river, either towards the hidden boathouse, which might, for all he knew, be no boathouse at all, or else towards the weir and again he realized he was ignorant of what he would find there.

But one thing was certain. Whatever kind of rescue was going on, and whether those two were alive or not, there would be police cars and an ambulance and a search for witnesses who had seen Margrethe and her companion and perhaps himself. It was very clear that he must leave this place. It was clear, too, that he could go neither to one side nor the other, nor cross the river at this point. Therefore he must leave the field by a different route and strike due north.

He cursed himself for not bringing a map with him. But then he had not suspected Margrethe of such melodramatic conduct. Some double crossing, some double talk, but not this. She was so palpably unsuited for it. A sick wave passed through him as he considered the enormous greed that must have driven her into such conduct.

When his shirt was dry he put it on. It was a modern summer shirt, open-necked, straight, to be worn inside or outside the trousers. He left it outside. In this way it would hide the dark wetness round the waist of his flannels, the legs of which were nearly dry. He picked up his blazer. It no longer dripped but was very damp. With a shudder he hung it round his shoulders and began to move along the bank towards the corner of the field.

The hedge came down almost to the river edge but not quite. Another field seemed to turn into the orchard of a small house. Both field and orchard were empty. No doubt the inhabitants, if any, were down at the river watching the accident.

Crossing the orchard, boldly, Boris moved deliberately, with slow steps, to a gate, passed through and found himself in another lane, evidently exclusive to this house and running roughly parallel with the one he had avoided.

Before long he reached the road. Down it to the west was the place where he and Margrethe had left the bus. He turned to the

east and finding another lane before long, that led north towards the hills, quite visible a few miles away, he went across to it and began to climb.

He walked for three hours, judging his direction by the sun and working towards the west, away from Marlow. Then, remembering that he could reach the railway at Henley and finding that name persistent on signposts, he went down from the hills, tired, hungry and sick at heart.

There was no food at the station. He found some ancient chocolate in a machine on the platform, but threw it away after one nauseating mouthful. He had to wait fifty minutes for his train. But at Paddington the buffets were open, so he gathered a meal of sorts on to a tray and ate hungrily, but without relish.

Afterwards he took a taxi to the end of the road where he lived and after a careful inspection, walked the rest of the way to his flat.

He remembered then that Stephen had gone back to Portsmouth. He would have to write to him to arrange a meeting. Though it was now desperately urgent to develop his plan, everything would depend upon Stephen's willingness to help him. No, not willingness. The will was always there. Ability. Freedom. Why did that word come up so often? Freedom.

He dragged his mind back from the edge of despair, where it was now swaying wearily. He began to count his friends and consider what they could do. Louise, charming Louise, a small part perhaps, but she was really a solace only, not to be relied upon. Margaret, poor Margaret, necessary, but perhaps dangerous. Ann, no real place for Ann. Sørensen, a well-wisher, but entirely helpless. His own secret fellow workers, utterly unreliable. Who else? He went to his telephone and spoke to Sczziliekowicz, the old man, his father's friend.

At ten o'clock he listened to the B.B.C. news. There had been a boating accident on the Thames near Marlow. In spite of the danger notices in mid-stream, the calm, reasonable voice said, a punt had gone to the wrong side of the river and over the weir. A young woman and a man, both said to be foreigners, had been thrown into the water and though the lock keeper and others had picked them up almost at once and applied artificial respiration, both were found to be dead when they arrived at

hospital.

The unknown man, the heavy body that had failed to push him in and the greedy bitch who had tried also to kill him. Margrethe, the gay, quick-witted lunch companion. Margrethe, the pale-gold ice-maiden.

Chapter Sixteen

The newspaper account of the accident on Monday morning made the whole plot very clear to Boris. The spot had been carefully chosen, a part of the river-bank where no other boats would be found because danger notices set up on posts in the water guided craft to the opposite bank. He had been directed into the field for two reasons; so that he would not see the notices, hidden by the bend in the stream and so that no one would see him at the boathouse.

But it was clear from the account that the drowned man, whose name and nationality were still withheld, had hired the punt much further upstream and had embarked Margrethe at a chosen spot near those houses she had pointed out as the boathouse, but where no boathouse existed. Here the man must have gone ashore to creep up behind Boris while Margrethe engaged him in discussion about their lunch. He had been lucky to see the look in her eyes and to have the branch handy. Or had he really been prepared for something of the sort. Certainly he had been more alert than usual, if that were possible. Certainly Sørensen's clear warning and wish to transfer him had given him his doubts of Margrethe's sincerity.

Boris did not go out that morning until lunch-time, when he bought an early edition of an evening paper. The reporters had been to work on the drowning with much enthusiasm, he found, assisted by the disclosure of Margrethe's identity. They had discovered that she had met a man at Marlow railway station and had travelled with him on a bus. They assumed that this man was the other victim. So far so good. Two station employees and the bus conductor remembered Margrethe; no one could describe the man. The punt belonged to a boathouse a mile above the fatal weir and had been hired quite early that morning.

This was fortunate. In planning carefully, the would-be assassins had made his own presence unnecessary. The man could have left the punt tied up somewhere along the river and gone on to Marlow to pick up Margrethe. There was nothing to

prove it was not she who had travelled from London that morning. On the contrary. She had left Paddington by an earlier train than his own. Since she had dictated the time for their meeting he had taken the appropriate train. As she knew he would. Clever girl. Cold-blooded, scheming harpy.

They had forgotten only one thing, the two of them and that the most important; his constant, conditioned, unfailing appreciation of danger. He was like an animal in his awareness, he thought, with weary disgust. An animal on the run. Would it never end?

In Sczilіekowicz's room that evening he allowed himself to slip back into the well-preserved civilization of the old man's surroundings. There was no doubt that he was welcome. Sczilіekowicz was alone and did not even mention the general except in passing.

"We hoped you were not offended that evening at the curious little club – international students' club – isn't that what they call it?"

"Something of the sort."

"You see we had a certain knowledge of your – contact."

"Which?" asked Boris, bluntly.

The old man smiled.

"The girl," he said. "It was the other we wished to identify. And to make up our minds that you were aware of what you were doing."

"At that time," said Boris, carefully, "I was not fully aware."

"But you are now?"

"Yes."

"And so?"

"I am grateful to you for interrupting that meeting, but it has meant certain additional difficulties for me."

"I was your father's friend," said Sczilіekowicz. "Can you not be more frank with me?"

Boris's whole inclination at any time was to withhold facts, to give nothing away. But his present need was very great. Also his inward urge to find some solid ground under his feet in the present swamp where he moved. He plunged.

"I was sent here to work for the Russians," he said, speaking quickly in a low voice. "I did nothing and so now they want to eliminate me to prevent me disclosing what I know of their

methods and organization in this country."

"All that is negative," said Sczliekowicz, gently. "You have, on the contrary, been very active."

"For others, I have, for several years, making money where and how I could. Never anything of importance for Russia. Only what was needed to continue at sea."

"This seems to be generally known."

"I'm afraid so. And that means it will come to an end, one way or another."

"What d'you mean?" For the first time that evening, the old man's voice expressed anxiety. He went on, "Have you done something irrevocable? Something outrageous? Had you anything to do with the death of Margrethe Olsen?"

Boris, thankful to be cut short in a confession he knew to be dangerous, smiled.

"Margrethe? Oh no, I was not responsible. She died because she changed her allegiance, as you yourself had discovered."

"That isn't an answer," Sczliekowicz growled. "But I suppose I'll have to take it as one. But if you haven't come here tonight as a consequence of this accident, why the devil are you here?"

"Because you were my father's friend," said Boris, very seriously, "and as such I want to ask you to be the executor of my will."

"Your *will*?"

The old man was astounded.

"Are you ill? You don't look like a man in his last illness. Have you any property to leave? Anyone to leave it to? A refugee – arriving from the sea – with nothing but his seaman's clothes—"

"My life is in danger. I have a certain sum of money to dispose of. If you agree I will give you the particulars. Or you can get them from my solicitor. I will give you his name. The will was drawn up earlier this afternoon. I shall sign it before the end of the week."

Sczliekowicz sighed. Other exiles had approached him on a similar errand. Men chiefly, an occasional woman, cut off from the channels of a law of customs they knew and understood. Boris was different. A life apart, in spite of his brief confession; a life unknown, fearful, secret, lived without regard for the past, where he himself found his own solace, or for the future, where the young hoped to achieve some goal. Boris was no longer

young, but he was the son of the murdered Alexei.

"Of course, of course," he muttered. "Anything I can do, my boy. But it will not be necessary. I'm old. You'll outlive me, easily. You must do so."

"If I die you will be notified, I hope," Boris said, frowning. The old man's agitation upset him and he had to make certain things clear.

"If I die," he repeated, "and you know of my death, you will arrange my funeral. There will be funds for that." He smiled and went on. "Any money left over, and you must bury me cheaply so that there *is* money left over, is to go to my father's groom, Sergei Alexandrowicz Voliniak, if he is alive, or to his English wife and his family." He held up his hand to check the other's excited exclamation. "Yes, he is, or has been, living in England. I dare not tell you any more now."

"*Dare* not? But this is tremendous news! Why have we never heard of him or got into contact?"

"There is a good reason. He has been away a great deal. His English wife … No, you mustn't ask me any more. You will have the whole story when I have gone."

"Oh, Boris," Scziliekowicz said, getting up and going across to him where he sat. "Oh, my dear boy, what are you going to do?"

Boris rose and embraced him according to the custom of his country and thanked him, brokenly, much moved by his concern, but told him nothing more. When they were calmer Scziliekowicz poured drinks for them both and they discussed the peculiarities of British government and the curious indifference to politics of all classes of Englishmen.

After he had finished his drink Boris thanked his host warmly for all his kindness, promised to let him know when the will was signed, gave him Bill Phillimore's address in case an emergency should arise at any time and went home.

Though it was nine o'clock, with summer time there was full daylight in the streets. A sunset glow still warmed the sky in the west and dimmed the street lamps that had just come on. Boris was reminded of the white nights in his prison camp in Siberia during the brief season of summer when hopeful fools tried to escape and mostly died for it. He shivered, though the night was pleasantly warm and was thankful when he had his own door locked behind him.

A telegram had been delivered in his absence. It was from Stephen arranging to meet him in Portsmouth the next day. This was a brisk answer to his letter, which could only have reached his friend that morning. Half an hour later the bell rang. Boris went to open the door with his hand ready inside his jacket and found John Carfax on the mat outside.

"I want a word with you," said John, moving into the flat, "about that Russian chap who was drowned yesterday."

The rest of the week moved steadily by for Boris. His day in Portsmouth was both interesting and satisfactory. Stephen, with youthful enthusiasm, embellished Boris's plan with ingenious and fairly practical suggestions. Some of them the Pole considered too fantastic, others too risky, but he gained a new light on the British imagination and individual resource. No wonder they extricated themselves from hopeless positions. It was only at the top they seemed to fail, when sentiment or traditional rigidity stifled this quality, making it sterile, out-of-date, smothered under useless loads of custom. Boris went back to London on Tuesday evening both heartened and pleased by Stephen's enthusiasm for his plan. Also slightly more anxious, because the full control of it no longer rested with himself. For many years he had acted without help from anyone. He found it difficult and frightening now to rely on others.

Wednesday afternoon was a visiting day at the hospital near Reading. Boris went to see Voliniak again, found him much improved, though still weak on his legs, but looking forward with joy to returning home at the end of the week.

He listened to Boris's plan with eager approval. They spoke in Polish, freely, because no one at the hospital understood that language.

"I have not many months left," he said, "perhaps only weeks. I would like to spend them with my wife and family."

"You shall. You shall, Sergei Alexandrowicz. No harm shall come to you for your help. I would not ask for it otherwise."

"It will be something to remember when the end comes," Sergei said, his dull eyes lighting up as he spoke. "To have been of use once again to the family my people have served in four, five, I don't know how many generations."

"It will be a great something," Boris answered, "and I swear to you, Sergei Alexandrowicz, that your family shall benefit. I have

made provision. You will hear of this later.''

"I don't want to be paid for my services,'' Voliniak said, with angry excitement.

"Now, now!''

Sister Hood put her head through the screens.

"Time for you to go, Mr. Sudenic. Didn't you hear the bell or were you two jabbering away so hard you were deaf to it?''

Boris got up at once. He pressed Sergei's hand, said "Goodbye'' in English and went away with a heavy heart. He would see this true friend once more; once only. He might never again retrieve even so small a scrap of his past as Voliniak had given him.

He stayed in the flat all Thursday. In the evening Louise came to him. He saw at once that she was too full of anxiety for reproaches, though it was a full week since they had been together. At first he stopped her mouth with kisses and she submitted, forgetting her fears while he made love to her. Afterwards, with his head on her shoulder, both of them drowsy with pleasure, she began to complain gently, in the Swiss French she always used with him.

"I was afraid,'' she said. "I thought you had gone away. Then there was that terrible threat in the newspaper. We were all afraid; Mr. and Mrs. Brentwood were equally upset. And the Ogdens! I did not know they cared for you so much. Mrs. Ogden cried for a whole morning and the lunch was terrible.''

Boris laughed.

"You exaggerate, but I like it. I like people to be anxious about me. It makes me proud.''

"You're proud enough already. Why don't you explain? You had better make the most of me. I shall not be here much longer.''

"You too? But I thought you were in England for a year?''

"Then you *are* going? Why do you never tell me anything, Boris? Don't we love each other?''

He kissed her gently.

"We have been good lovers, my darling. But it will end soon. You go back to Switzerland and I go away. Did Margaret tell you to leave?''

"Of course. There was a long, silly talk about you. She is an innocent. So stupid. These English—''

“Margaret has the old standards,” Boris corrected her. “She is not a prude, as you think. She does not like affairs, but they happen, she knows, and it must always be very, very discreet. Or followed, in married people, by divorce, if it becomes generally known. As far as you are concerned, she is only afraid of a child.”

“How absurd! And not true. She is jealous. You were her old love, weren’t you?”

“Did she tell you that?”

“No. Mrs. Ogden told me. She has all the family scandals. From old Mrs. Brentwood. Colin’s mother, who detested Margaret.”

Boris stirred restlessly. He found this sort of conversation both distasteful and boring. But it was probably the last time he would hold Louise in his arms and he still found her very charming, very generous.

“Let us forget Margaret,” he said. “We have so little time, both of us. I need your help, Louise. I need it badly, my darling. I will tell you presently what you must do for me. But just now at this moment I can only think of how I love you.”

On Friday afternoon Boris went to see Margaret at the house in Fawcett Street. She was in the drawing room with the french windows open on a rain-soaked garden, where the clouds still emptied themselves in a fine, soft downpour. Boris shivered as he entered the room.

“Are you soaked?” Margaret said, jumping up. “I’ll shut the window. Would you like the fire?”

“No, no. I wore my coat. Mrs. Ogden took it away. I am not wet at all.”

He stretched out his hand to lift hers to his lips in his customary gesture of greeting, but Margaret turned abruptly away before he could touch her, stooping over an electric fire that stood in the grate.

“No fire, please,” Boris said. “Not for me. I am very warm with walking.”

“Sit down, then.”

They both sat, both silent now, each waiting for the other to begin a conversation. Boris sighed. He had come to make some important arrangements for which he needed her help and sympathy. But here she was, still angry with him, totally

withdrawn, polite, cold, armoured against both him and her own truer feelings. He sighed again, as audibly as possible.

"You are angry with me," he said, sadly. "You have already punished Louise and now you wish to punish me."

"I'd rather not talk about it," she said, looking at him as at a stranger.

"But Margaret, what have I done to offend you? We meet again as old friends, but without, surely without, any obligation to each other? I see your new life from the end of the war. I tell you mine. You are kind, you receive me in your house—"

"And you seduce a foreign girl for whom I am responsible! If – if the worst should happen, how could I face her parents?"

"This is not the real reason," Boris told her calmly. "You know, as I do, that Louise is not innocent. She is of age in her own country. She is able to make her own decisions for her personal life. And she is never – careless. So this is not the real reason."

"How dare you!"

Margaret, white-faced now with anger and a deep sense of outrage, jumped up from her chair and went to the window, staring out into the dismal garden, clutching the curtain in her effort to control herself.

"How could I understand that I should hurt you like this?" Boris said, with such wonder and sadness in his voice that Margaret's rage was melted away and she collapsed into bitter tears.

Boris got up, put an arm round her shoulders and drew her to the sofa where he sat her down beside him and let her weep, his arm still holding her. At last she began to wipe her eyes and blow her nose.

"I'm sorry," she said, gulping down the sobs that still rose in her throat. "I'm sorry. You must think I'm out of my mind."

"No. I think you are a woman who feels deeply," he said, "and loves deeply and this love you have kept in a prison when you should have released it to – to …"

He could not bring himself to say 'Colin'; it would sound too entirely sanctimonious and ridiculous. Besides, she understood him perfectly.

"Do you blame me for being faithful to you, even if you were only a memory?"

“Yes, Margaret. Such memories are sentimental, worthless, dangerous, often cruel.”

“I can see that you’ve suffered too much,” she said. “You’ve forgotten how to love. You’ve been betrayed too often.”

He shook his head and smiled.

“You must ask Louise if I have forgotten how to love.”

Again she was outraged, but now she reminded herself that she must not expect her standards to be his. He was, after all, a Pole, a foreigner. So she forced a smile and moved a little away from him, out of the disturbing shelter of his arm.

“I’m sorry,” she said again. “I do try to remember that I’m middle-aged and ought to behave as such. I suppose my life has been too easy. Colin has been too good to me – poor dear.”

“You must forgive me,” Boris said, cautiously. “But it is by you he is so poor.”

He expected another outburst of shocked rage, but she only stared at him while her eyes filled again with sad tears.

“Yes,” she said at last. “I deserved that. I have been unfair to him – too long.”

So now we can move on, Boris thought. The problem is resolved in terms of British sport. British fair play. At last Margaret is satisfied in her soul. Dear, silly, charming, formidable woman! She will play now according to the rules of the game. It is even possible that she has always loved her husband, cheating herself as much as she has cheated him. But that was one of the mysteries of her Englishness, that he was not qualified to probe. And, dear God, how little he wished to probe it!

There was a long silence between them. Boris felt that it would be better, as a mark of respect to her recent exposure of herself, as a mark too of his very real regard for her, that she should herself lead the conversation back on to easier ground. She did so, very suddenly, going with common sense and adult concern, to the question of his own future.

“This business of extradition,” she began. “Of course it’s nonsense. John Carfax told me not to worry when I rang him up.”

“You were so anxious about me?”

“Naturally. Colin was, too. He was quite upset.”

“That was very nice of Colin.”

“He *is* nice. He said it was monstrous. I think he’s been seeing John, too, but of course he never tells me anything about what he does at the F.O.”

“I thought,” Boris said, carefully, “that when I came to England I would find peace and safety. But that is wrong. There is no peace, no safety. Three times I have been attacked. They have failed, but they will not always fail. Sometimes I think I should end it myself. This uncertainty. This fear! I have the means …”

He put his hand inside his jacket and drew out Stephen’s gun from its holster, slowly, watching her and the door and the open window now that he had once more exposed himself, armed, in this room.

Margaret shrank away, horrified, with a hand at her mouth.

“Suicide!” she whispered. “No, Boris, no! Not that! Anything – anything—”

The gun disappeared from his hand in an instant. He gave a great laugh.

“You have only partly understood me,” he said. “Now I will tell you what we must do.”

Chapter Seventeen

On Monday morning the newspapers carried indignant paragraphs stating that Boris Sudenic, the Polish seaman accused by the Soviet Government of theft and of deserting his ship, had been taken into custody pending a decision by the Home Secretary as to whether or not he should be deported. This unheard-of threat to an Iron Curtain victim was intolerable, most of the papers shouted.

On Monday morning at ten-thirty exactly Stephen and Ann arrived separately at the house in Fawcett Street. The former carried a large suitcase. Margaret met them in the hall.

"Colin's here!" she said, in an urgent whisper. "Says he has a sore throat and won't go in to work today for fear of spreading infection."

"Honestly!" said Ann, fiercely.

"That's torn it," Stephen muttered. "Where is he?"

"In the study. Come straight upstairs, both of you."

"Up? Why?"

"The Ogdens haven't left yet. Colin again."

"Oh hell, he'll wreck the whole thing!"

"Hush!"

Ten minutes later they crept down again. The Ogdens, dispatched together on a special shopping errand had now left, so the basement was free.

"Can you manage?" Margaret said anxiously. "I ought to go up to look out for Boris."

"I hope to God Colin doesn't hear him arrive."

"He's almost certain to."

"What about Louise?"

"She's in it. She's in her room at the moment. I'll bring her down."

Stephen considered.

"We can't alter anything till he gets here," he said at last, with a helpless gesture.

Ann said, "I know. I'll go up the back way and meet him as he arrives. Bring him straight down here."

"You do that."

Stephen turned to his suitcase to get on with his own preparations. Margaret went upstairs to watch. Ann took a leather and began to clean the outside of the window in the area.

At eleven o' clock Boris arrived in a taxi, carrying a soft bag, bulging with clothes. He was intercepted by Ann, went quickly to the back door and into the kitchen. A very rapid conference followed, at the end of which Stephen left the house by the front door, Ann and Margaret went into the garden and up to the drawing-room french windows, which were open and Boris went up the kitchen stairs into the hall, where Margaret met him.

At that precise moment Colin opened his study door. He had heard the taxi, he had heard the front door close. He had looked out of his window to see the back of a familiar figure turn into the tradesmen's entrance. He had read his newspaper that morning and came at once to the obvious conclusion. But he did not expect to see Boris disappearing rapidly into the drawing-room followed by Margaret.

She shut the door behind her quickly.

"Colin saw you!"

Boris turned to Ann, speaking rapidly, with complete authority. "He will come here at once. Ring for the ambulance from his room. To the end of the road. You understand? Stephen must not be discovered. It cannot wait. At once, Ann!"

"What is the meaning of this?" Colin said icily, from the doorway.

Ann slipped past him, shutting the door behind her.

"The meaning of what?" asked Margaret, in a high unnatural voice.

"Sudenic," Colin went on, ignoring her. "What are you doing in my house?"

"I come to take my leave," answered Boris, quite truthfully.

"You are reported in the papers as being under arrest."

"These British newspapers," Boris said, lightly. "They must always have the great story, the drama."

"Are you telling me the report has no foundation whatever? Or that you have managed to avoid arrest? In which case you have no right to be in my house, compromising me and my wife."

"Colin!" said Margaret, "for God's sake don't be so damned pompous!"

"You're hiding him," Colin said, furiously. "D'you think I didn't see the bobby who's just been here—"

"Bobby?" asked Boris, with maddening politeness.

"Cop. Robert. Police officer. Went out of the front door a minute or two ago. Making inquiries, I suppose?" He turned to Margaret. "And all the time you had this man hidden and handed out a pack of lies! Didn't you? It's – it's monstrous!"

Ann slipped into the room again, signalling success. Boris, half turned away, looked quickly at his watch. Eleven-thirteen. The deadline was eleven-fifteen. He whirled round, despair and fury in his face, his arms raised.

"So!" he cried, on a high note. "You hunt me down, too? You hate me, all of you English! I upset you and your stupid idea of the law! Very well! It is the end! There is no escape, so I go my own way! I go NOW!"

The gun was in his hand. Margaret screamed out, "No, Boris! No, wait! Don't do it! Don't do it!"

Boris thrust his way past Ann, who stood by the door, her eyes shining, her mouth open. He slammed the door behind him, a shot exploded in the hall, there was a long wail, the front door crashed to, Louise tottered into the drawing-room and with her back to the hall, cried out, "He has shot himself! *Mon Dieu*, he has shot himself!"

Colin, appalled, rushed towards the door, pushing aside Ann and Louise, who both got in his way. He saw the hall empty, full of powder smoke and spattered with blood. He dived for the front door, but Margaret was between it and him.

"You have driven him to suicide!" she cried in a terrible voice and fell forward into his arms.

Colin held her, bewildered, indignant, trying to grasp the sequence of events that had led to this ghastly situation. He foresaw endless inquiry, criticism, condemnation perhaps. Why the devil did the chap have to pull a scene from a melodrama instead of taking a quiet pill or using the gas oven? Or the gun, if he preferred it, in his own flat?

"Carry her to the sofa," Ann was urging behind him.

"I ought to go after – He's made a muck of it—"

"Carry her in, Colin! You can't put her down here, in the

middle of his – of his *blood*!"

He groaned aloud. Ann said, with sudden pity for him, "I'll look out. I'll get help. You see to Margaret."

He nodded and picking up the limp burden that was clinging to him with considerable strength by the arms wrapped about his neck, he laid her down on the drawing-room sofa and tried, without immediate success, to disentangle himself.

When he managed it he found Louise at his elbow with a glass of water.

"You give it," he said, at last asserting himself.

"I cannot! I dare not!" Louise was trembling, the glass shook, obviously she would slop it all on the carpet if he didn't take it from her.

While he was lifting Margaret's head, Ann came back.

"There's a crowd at the end of the road," she said, "and a cop in charge as far as I can see. They'll have ordered an ambulance."

Colin dropped Margaret's head, which struck the sofa quite hard and sprang to his feet.

"Look after her," he said. "I must go to that poor devil. If he's done for it's my fault! I'll never forgive myself!"

He tore out of the house. The three women clustered at the front window, staring down the road.

"I can't see the ambulance," Margaret said, anxiously.

"Colin's doing a pretty good sprint," Ann said, with admiration.

"Oh yes, he can run. He was in the Varsity Sports when he was up. Won the half-mile his last year."

"I hope—Oh, there's the ambulance!"

"Thank God! I hope the crowd's too thick for Colin to get through before they take him away. He'd be certain to spot Stephen."

"Bill said he'd lay on enough of his own buddies to keep the real crowd out of range."

Louise, who being the shortest could not really see anything from behind the backs of the other two, moved away. Margaret turned to her.

"What did you do with the liver?"

"I put it back in the fridge." She made a face of disgust. "How could I know the plate would have so much blood?"

“You certainly have rather overdone it. Never mind.”

“I think I will never eat liver again.”

Boris came into the room. He had worn, that morning, a dark navy-blue suit, a white shirt and a black tie. He was now struggling into a naval officer’s jacket, which was a little too tight for him across the shoulders. The jacket of his suit was stuffed into his open grip; a black brief-case lolled out of it and fell on the floor.

“It goes according to plan?” he asked, as the three women clustered about to help him.

“It does,” Ann said. “Colin’s filled with remorse and is trying to help. He ran down the road very fast. We couldn’t keep him.”

“Just as well,” Margaret said. “If he’d been in a fit state to notice he’d have seen I wasn’t a bit pale when I did my fainting act.”

“But the ambulance? If Colin sees Sergei it is all over. He will exclaim – protest—”

“I don’t think so.”

Stephen was at the door of the room, a hired policeman’s helmet in one hand, a handkerchief in the other, mopping his face.

“Don’t worry, Boris,” he said. “The ambulance got there about two minutes after your friend did a most realistic fall on the pavement, just outside the crowd round Bill with the toy space-ships.

He’s sold quite a few, by the way. That ploy worked like a bloody charm, Ann. People swarmed up from nowhere. Congratulations.”

“I knew Bill would play it fast,” she said, smiling proudly at her brother’s achievement.

“You saw Sergei into the ambulance?” Boris demanded.

“On to the stretcher. Daren’t stay any longer when Colin steamed up. He was on the stretcher, though, with his eyes shut, limp, really putting on a tremendous act, heavy breathing – the lot.”

He began to loosen his policeman’s jacket.

“Did anyone see you come in here again?” Ann demanded. “I mean was there anyone in the street?”

“Not that I noticed. But I was concentrating on keeping my back turned to Colin. I’d better hide this stuff before he comes back.”

“In my room,” Margaret said.

“Ann,” said Boris. “The car that Carfax will send should now be in the lane beyond the garden. Will you go to find out, please?”

“Here,” said Margaret. “I’ll get you the key. It’s in the study.”

Ann followed her out of the room. Louise flung herself into Boris’s arms, crying freely.

“You go now and I shall never, never see you again!”

He held her close, stroking her hair and murmuring to her in French and Polish.

“My darling, it was always to be like this. My little love, you have been so good to me. I shall not forget you, but you must forget me. You will marry Franz soon. Promise me.”

She nodded. She had few illusions. She knew she would be replaced, but she thought it might be true that he would not forget her.

They kissed, long and tenderly and drew apart as Margaret came back into the room.

“Ann has gone to the garden door,” she said. “Oh, here she is. Well?”

“The car’s there,” Ann said. “Waiting.”

“Then it is goodbye.” Boris kissed Ann gravely, watched without rancour by Stephen, who had just come back into the room, dressed in his own clothes.

“Stephen. Thank you for all you have done and will do.”

They shook hands firmly, Stephen silent, having no words to express his sudden desolation.

Boris turned to Margaret, put his hands on her shoulders and kissed her, too, as he had kissed Ann, with affection and respect.

“All my friends,” he said and left it at that.

Margaret stepped forward to go with him across the lawn, but he held out his hand to Louise and together they moved down the steps from the balcony, then separating the girl went first across the grass, with Boris, his naval cap on his head, following. The other three watched from the windows.

“Christ, he’s wearing it like a damned beret!” Stephen groaned.

His heartfelt complaint broke the tension. They laughed, relaxed, began to feel the triumph of their plans.

“He’s off,” Ann said. “That’s the car starting.”

He had gone. Louise came back over the lawn, her head rigid, staring in front of her.

“Poor child!” Margaret said. Ann and Stephen exchanged a look but said nothing.

Louise went in through the back door and when she had shut it she leaned against it, not crying, but silently tearing up her heart into small pieces – for the waste-paper basket.

Chapter Eighteen

"Look who's here!" Stephen said, suddenly.

John Carfax's head rose up the balcony steps. He walked in through the french windows.

"What have you lot been up to?" he asked, pleasantly.

They looked at each other, suddenly seeing their exploit in a ridiculous light.

Margaret said, indignantly, "Where have you sprung from, John? Barging in here with an awkward question?"

"I was in the car, of course. Going to see your friend off. But he gave me a rather garbled account of some strange doings in this house and up the road and mentioned Colin, so I decided I'd be more useful here, perhaps. He's quite capable of looking after himself."

Stephen began to laugh, but checked at once.

"Anything funny in that?"

"Well, there is, actually."

"We're a bit above ourselves," Ann said, half giggling herself. "Can't we tell him, Margaret?"

"There'd be no harm now, I suppose," she answered. "Better tell him now before Colin comes back."

Stephen went to the front window.

"What the devil's keeping him?" he said. "The street's empty now. The crowd's gone."

They told Carfax, each contributing his or her share of the conspiracy. As they built up the story its brilliance and ingenuity struck them afresh. At the end they sat looking at M.I.5, waiting for some acknowledgement of their skill.

But they were disappointed. He merely turned to Margaret and said, "As I came up from the garden door I saw your ancient neighbour. She was showing signs of excitement."

"Lady Cotville?"

"That who she is? I think you'll have to square her, Margaret."

"I'll take her in some flowers this afternoon. I often do. What shall I tell her?"

"Talk openly about parking in this street. Say the police have

told you visitors with cars must leave them in the mews. Say your naval visitor was a bit annoyed."

"What about you? She's terribly inquisitive and she retails it all to her friends."

"Oh, say my car was farther along."

"She'll be surprised when no one else uses that door."

"She'll forget, won't she?"

"Perhaps. She's not very strong in the head, now."

Ann had been waiting impatiently during this exchange. Now she burst out, "He's going to Tilbury, isn't he? He said you were helping him. South America, isn't it?"

"So he told you that, did he? I thought he might."

"That was why he wanted us to arrange this mock suicide. So that he could disappear and *They* would really think he was dead."

Carfax looked angry.

"He didn't tell me that. Asked me if I could put out a rumour he'd been arrested. Of course I said that couldn't be done."

"But it *was* done," Stephen said. "How did he work that one?"

"He was never at a loss," Carfax said, bitterly. "He has a positive genius for getting other people to do his dirty work."

"That isn't fair!" they cried in chorus.

"But he *is* going to South America, isn't he?" Ann persisted. "Can't you tell us? Is he going to South America?"

Carfax shook his head. He would tell them nothing more. Instead he began to ask them about Colin. He shook his head again over their detail of how Colin had been foxed.

"Pointless," he said. "Quite pointless."

"No, it wasn't," Margaret was emphatic now. "It was arranged to stop pursuit. Boris knew they have spies everywhere. He was being watched. We couldn't risk Colin interfering. We couldn't let him in on it. His conscience wouldn't have allowed him to co-operate, would it?"

"They aren't as clever as some people imagine. Energetic, yes. Dedicated, for the most part. Plenty of personnel. Plenty of equipment. But crude on the whole. Operations not very well laid on."

"Boris knows them better than you do."

"Perhaps."

They became silent. Margaret got up, saying, "I'll make some

coffee,'' and went down to the kitchen, where she found the Ogdens, their shopping-bags on the table, listening to Louise, who was trying not to answer their excited questions.

"Oh, m'm,'' Mrs. Ogden said at once, clutching Margaret's arm. "Ogden and me heard such dreadful things when we got off the bus at the top of the road.''

"Mr. Sudenic, m'm,'' Ogden said, in a gruff voice. "Nothing serious happened to the gentleman, I hope?''

Margaret sent Louise away, put on a very serious voice and said, "We must hope for the best. He's been taken to hospital.''

Mrs. Ogden collapsed on a chair.

"Then it's true,'' she said. "That Home Secitary, whoever he is, has got something to answer for, I will say.''

Margaret put together her coffee tray without assistance from her stricken staff.

"Louise said she wanted a bucket and floor cloth,'' Mrs. Ogden said, recovering herself a little. "I was about to ask her what for, when you sent her away, m'm.''

Margaret hesitated. Perhaps it would make Mrs. Ogden worse to see the hall, but on the other hand, if Louise were left to clean up alone the girl might break down completely and confide the true story to the Ogdens, who would never be able to keep it to themselves.

"If you wouldn't mind, you might take them up to her,'' she said, gently, going to the percolator, which was beginning to gurgle. "It was to clean up the hall, where the paint is stained, in the – accident.''

Mrs. Ogden moved at once.

"It's only the hall,'' Margaret explained. "After we heard the shot we found – blood – there.''

"Good God Almighty!'' exclaimed Ogden, who had been listening at the scullery door.

Mrs. Ogden set her lips in a firm line.

"I'll go up,'' she said.

When she arrived in the hall she found Louise, standing looking helplessly about her. Mrs. Ogden inspected the hall carpet, where a few pale stains were showing, and the wainscot, where the stains were darker.

"You go along in to them and have your coffee,'' she said, kindly. "I'll get on with this lot. You've 'ad a shock, love. Not

that we 'aven't all had a shock, but we weren't here for the worst of it, like."

Louise thanked her, but turned away and went upstairs to her own room. She had no wish to hear any more talk about Boris, his escape, his future or anything at all to do with him.

Mrs. Ogden set about cleaning the carpet and turned her attention more closely to the wainscot. She stared for some time at the dark, reddish-purple liquid drops that hung there. As a woman, an old woman, a wife and mother, she was well acquainted with blood in many forms and was in no way disturbed by this sight. She had dealt with wounds, too, freshly bleeding or clotted, clean or infected. After a minute or two, turning over what she saw in her mind, she set to cleaning the stained paint, after which she took the bucket downstairs and explained her views to Ogden, who was peeling potatoes for lunch.

It was a few minutes later, when Mrs. Ogden took the plate of liver out of the fridge, that she understood and called Ogden to her side.

"Look at that, Sam, will you?" she said, holding out the plate to him.

"Ba gum," he said, slowly. "Dry as a bone. It was fair swimming when I moved it breakfast time."

"It were. But fridge's as clean as a whistle."

"There weren't no shooting, then? No bloody suicide?"

"There were shot, all right. I saw hole above one of they pictures."

"It were put-up job. Happen 'e's not dead nor like to die at all."

They grinned at each other, delighted with this thought and their own cleverness.

"Mum's the word, though," Mrs. Ogden said, serious again.

"They'd never forgive us if they knew we'd twigged their little game."

"Take me for a fool?" Ogden growled and went back to his potatoes.

Upstairs the conspirators sipped their coffee and became calmer. Carfax no longer scolded them, though it was plain he had not forgiven their interference in his far simpler, more efficient plan. After all, it was Boris who had combined the two

schemes, who had enlisted the help of his old retainer to present a really convincing proof of his supposed desperation, while giving himself more security for his escape. But, characteristically, Carfax thought, he had left them holding the baby. It was up to himself to sort out the problem of getting this other man home safely, of squaring the hospital, of dodging the reporters. Not an easy task, any of it.

"Did Sudenic leave you any idea how you were to clean up after him?" he asked.

"How d'you mean?" Stephen asked.

"His flat – the rent – the rest of his possessions? This stand-in of his? Was he paid or is he doing it out of pure devotion?"

They all looked blank.

"I thought as much," Carfax said, angrily. "Out of the country and doesn't give a damn what sort of mess he leaves behind him."

"I'm sure he wouldn't—" Ann began, but Margaret interrupted her.

"Of course he'll have made his own arrangements for his flat and everything. This stand-in, as you call him, no doubt has his own instructions as we had ours."

"Sudenic invented the whole scheme, did he?"

"Of course not," Stephen put in. "The main idea, yes, but we worked out the details for him."

"It was such *fun*," Ann said, so wistfully that they all, including Carfax, collapsed into laughter.

The telephone bell rang. Margaret picked up the receiver.

"For you, John," she said. "Take it in the study, if you like."

He went across the hall rapidly. When he took the call Margaret put down the instrument in her hand.

"Silly," said Stephen. "You could have listened in."

"And been told to get off the line? Don't be absurd. John would know I hadn't hung up. You'll have to pipe down now, Steve. You're a bit above yourself. Our little excitement is over."

"John's isn't," said Stephen, but he would not explain what he meant.

In the study Carfax was at that moment learning what lay behind Stephen's remark.

"D'you mean to say you've *lost* him?" Carfax said, furiously.

A very worried voice went on with the report.

"As I said, sir, it was in Barking. Traffic was heavy. I took the centre lane at these lights, to get ahead without delay. There was a lorry on my right and another car on my left. I was looking at the lights, but I happened to glance in my back mirror. I saw Mr. – the gentleman – get out of my near side door and go straight through the off-side rear door into the other car. The lights were just changing, sir. I had to move."

"Why didn't you follow him?"

"The car turned off at once down the side road. Three cars followed it, two straight on, before I could pull over. By the time I was round the corner his car had gone. Must have turned out of that road as soon as it could."

"What was its number?"

There was a pause, then a small voice said, "I didn't get it, sir. Those other cars between me and it—"

Carfax swore.

"I'm very sorry, sir," the voice said, aggrieved now. "It was all over in a flash."

"It didn't occur to you to watch for other cars following you? I thought I told you—"

"I kept as good a lookout as I could, sir. The traffic – and then it happened so unexpected—"

"Most things do," said Carfax, impatiently, "in this business. Did he take his grip?"

"Yes, sir. But he left the brief-case."

"Very well. Report back at once and turn in the brief-case to me."

It was a dummy, anyway, he thought wearily. Sudenic had balled up his plan yet again. He was sick of Sudenic. After making two calls himself, he went back to the others.

"You may as well know," he said, "that your considerate friend has double-crossed me again."

He repeated what he had heard.

"It seems to have been an arrangement of his own, but naturally my driver in the car that took him from here, was not able to see much. Apparently Sudenic left our car of his own accord, with his bag, stepped into the other car, which seems to have had only a driver, no passengers, and went off into the blue."

"He wasn't kidnapped?" Ann said, clasping her hands in

sudden anguish.

"If he was," Carfax answered. "I couldn't care less. But I don't think so."

"Where's he gone?" asked Stephen innocently.

"Don't ask futile questions when you're probably the one that knows the answer. No, don't tell me. I don't want to know. If you get into trouble later it's your own affair."

Stephen shrugged.

"Think I'd risk my so-called career to that extent?" he asked, smiling.

"Boris had other friends," said Margaret. "I'm sure of that."

"I suppose he didn't like the idea of South America," Ann said. "I must say I don't altogether blame him."

"Have you now sealed all the other ports, as he isn't going to Tilbury?" Stephen asked.

"D'you expect me to answer that?"

They glared at one another, then Carfax said, "By the way, I noticed a parcel addressed to you, on the table near the door in Colin's room."

Stephen went out, returning in a few minutes with a revolver in one hand and a note in the other.

"I take back my last remark, John," he said. "Boris has given me back my gun – the one he gave me before the war. He says —" He slipped the weapon into his pocket and read from the paper in his hand. *"'I give you back this, Stephen, with all my thanks for the help it has been to me. I shall not need it now. Carfax has presented me with more modern equipment.'"*

"John!" they all said, together.

Carfax said nothing. There was nothing he could say, except bring down more curses on that bastard's head. He looked at his watch.

"Good heavens!" he said, "d'you realize the time?"

"You'll have lunch?" Margaret asked, automatically. "It doesn't look as if Colin will be back. I wonder where he's got to."

She spoke lightly, but she was feeling guilty and rather miserable at the thought of Colin, humiliated, tricked, keeping away because he could not bear to confront them.

They heard the front door open and shut and footsteps, slow footsteps, in the hall.

"I believe that's Colin now," Ann said.

The drawing-room door opened and he stood there with a tragic face and drooping, exhausted figure.

"He's dead!" he announced. "Dead of a gunshot wound the doctor said. I followed the ambulance to the hospital, a man in the crowd told me where to go. I waited – I didn't go up. They told me it was no good. He wouldn't know anyone. They found the gun in his pocket. Suicide. As if I didn't know. It was my fault! I drove him to it! He's dead!"

His stricken audience could not speak, except for Carfax, who said sharply, "Did you say a gun? Let me pass, Colin. I must use your phone."

He was out of the room in an instant to ring up the local police divisional headquarters with an urgent request to secure the weapon immediately for M.I.5. Afterwards he left the house, without explanation and without taking leave of the others. They could tell Colin what they liked. He had more important matters to see to.

When Carfax was out of the room Stephen said, shakily, "Are you absolutely sure he's – the man is – *dead*?"

Colin nodded.

"It wasn't Boris," Stephen went on. "It wasn't Boris."

"*Not Boris*? Are you out of your mind or am I?"

They began to tell him, all together, so that he had to shout to them to stop and let him hear them one at a time and slowly.

He took it in at last, but when they expected his usual reaction of anger, scorn and sarcasm, he only moved forward very slowly, a stricken man still, and dropping into a chair, covered his face with his hands.

Stephen took Ann by the arm and led her away. They found Ogden in the hall. He had come up to inquire if lunch was to be served at the usual time and how many there would be for it. Stephen opened the study door: the room was empty.

"Mr Carfax has left," he said. "We're just off now. Mr. Colin has come in and Mrs. Colin is with him. I'd give them a quarter of an hour or so. He's very tired and they're both upset."

"Very good, sir." Ogden looked him straight in the eyes. "I'd like to say how much Martha and me feel over this. But it's best for Mr Sudenic to go, sir, isn't it?"

Margaret knelt beside Colin, her only concern to comfort and

restore him. At first she made no headway. He did not seem to hear her until he lifted his head and said, with great bitterness, “You can’t beat those ruthless fanatics with a charade of that sort.”

“But you did beat them, Colin. You’ve made them believe it really was Boris. They’ll accept it. They’ll stop hunting for him. If that other man – he was an old servant from their Polish home – if it wasn’t those devils who killed him, mistaking him for Boris – then he killed himself, for Boris. You had nothing to do with it. You couldn’t have.”

She put her arms round him to draw him close.

“Stop blaming yourself, stop grieving, my darling. We’re all so proud of you, so grateful. Because it’s you who have saved Boris. You, Colin.”

He knew it was not true, or only partly true, but it was supremely comforting. With hope swelling his heart to bursting point he abandoned himself to her new surprising tenderness.

Chapter Nineteen

Boris went aboard the English freighter, Gertrude, at Harwich soon after four o'clock that afternoon. His escort, Bill Phillimore, Ann's brother, dropped him from the second escape car about half a mile from the docks. There was nothing strange in that area in a seaman, dressed in jersey, serge trousers and sea boots, hauling a grip and oilskins from the back seat, thanking the driver in broken English for the lift and trudging off in the direction of the wharves.

As he had left the black brief-case in the car John Carfax had provided, so now he left in Bill's car a naval officer's jacket and cap. Besides these, on the back seat, all covered by a rug, there lay the pedlar's tray of toy spaceships.

The crowd had melted abruptly when the ambulance drove away, but before that Bill himself had faded from the scene, packed away his wares and taken up his station in his car not far from the entrance to the mews behind the Brentwoods' house.

It had all been too easy, Bill thought, as he drove on again after dropping Boris. He turned out of the docks road to work his way back into the town and from the centre took the main road to London. Too easy and all over too soon. Life was going to be pretty drab for the next week or two.

When he reached his ship Boris was told to see the captain at once. The latter, a man in late middle-age, weather-beaten and experienced, eyed him for a few minutes without speaking. Then held out a hand for Boris's papers.

The latter handed them over, the detail of Voliniak's previous voyages, proof of his identity, the hospital certificate of discharge. Only in the case of this document had Boris made any alteration and that merely in the date. He had removed the horizontal part of the seven that indicated the current month of July so that it appeared as if he had left the hospital in January.

The skipper read the certificate, continuing to stare at it while he considered this stalwart crew's illness. 'Operation for intestinal obstruction'. It meant nothing much to him. Only that the man had been opened up for something wrong with his guts

and might have less than efficient belly muscles.

"Fit now?" he asked. "Lift weights and so on?"

"Yes, sir. Perfect, sir."

"Long time, isn't it? Did they order this when you left the hospital?"

"They said not to go on ship, not lift weight, eat good food, six months. I do as they say."

"You'll get good food here," the skipper said with a faint grin. "And plenty of hard work."

"Thank you, sir," Boris answered.

The skipper turned to the passport. The measurements and colour details were near enough, Boris knew. He had an answer ready for the captain's next question.

"No beard?" he asked. "You look quite different without it."

Boris allowed himself to smile.

"They shave it off at the hospital. Then my wife like me like this, so I not grow again. Now I grow."

The skipper nodded. He put the papers together and handed them back.

"Why d'you want to sail with me?" he asked. "We call at Gdynia first off. Stockholm and Copenhagen for cargo on the way back. I took you on because I need a man who speaks Polish. My last chap wouldn't sign on again. Said he didn't feel safe there. What about you?"

"I have my British nationality," said Boris, drawing himself up proudly.

"O.K. It's up to you. Report to the bo'sun. We take the tide at nineteen hours. No shore leave for you."

"Aye, aye, sir. Thank you, sir."

Boris turned away. So far all was well. Sergei had told him how to address English ships' officers. This captain had accepted him; there had been no awkward moments. But Carfax must now know what had happened. Just over two hours and a half till they sailed.

The time passed quickly enough, dumping his possessions, meeting his shipmates, carrying out a variety of orders. He knew the work basically, though it was all done in a slightly different way. The atmosphere was easier, more natural than on Russian ships, though the jobs were more efficiently planned and executed and the gear was much more modern. He thought he

would enjoy his voyage. His last voyage. He had already made up his mind never to go to sea again.

At seven o'clock precisely they cast off and left the dockside. In a couple of hours' time they were out in the North Sea with the light fading and the stars coming out and a half-moon rising from the faint clouds on the horizon ahead. When Boris went off watch he found several evening newspapers lying about the fo' castle. He read the first accounts of Sergei's death.

He lay in his bunk but could not sleep. Grief shook him and remorse and fury with that blind, obstinate, stupid unknown man, so careless of life he had fired at a mackintosh and hat he recognized, without making sure of the identity of the man who wore them.

But it was he, not Sergei, who had suggested they should exchange their outer garments that morning when they met at Notting Hill Gate. In the public lavatory they had each put down his own and taken up the other's. This simplest of disguises had been successful as far as Colin was concerned (the paper mentioned his presence at the hospital), but fatal to Sergei.

The devils! They must have used a silencer. But the fault – the ultimate fault, was his own.

He would not allow himself to believe in the possibility that Sergei had taken his own life. The man knew he was dying of cancer, but he had said several times that he hoped to spend a few more months in his home with the wife and family he loved. He, Boris, had taken away this last happiness. He would never be able to forgive himself for that.

During his next watch on deck Boris became calmer. Every hour took him farther from the immediate danger, the unrelenting pursuit he had suffered almost from the first day of his return to England. He had hoped for too much in his memories of that peaceful, law-abiding island. It was no longer peaceful, but heaving with social change, no longer law-abiding, but racked with crime and open cynical disregard of former moral, even intellectual, standards. And yet all the noisy, self-glorifying, self-exhibiting crew were less frightening than the frozen former leaders of public and private behaviour, who confused their ignorance with loyalty and confessed their prejudices, their ultimate indifference, with a smile. He had no regrets at leaving. The gulf between his life and theirs, his

experience and theirs, his hopes and fears and theirs, was too wide.

But he still grieved for Sergei and for his part in the man's death. It followed a pattern that seemed to pursue him over and over again. Did he lack foresight, imagination, reasonable care? Why did others always suffer, against his passionate wish, against his true love? Often, on night watches as *Gertrude* made her deliberate way across the North Sea, through the shoal-infested channels into the Baltic and along the shores of North Germany, he put his head down, unseen, on the rail and wept for the ills he had done and could never remedy.

By the time the ship reached Gdynia, Boris had surmounted the sharpness of his self-punishment. He knew what he would do on landing. His English clothes would bring him sufficient currency in the black market to buy his railway ticket. In his grip he also had a duffle coat that he would exchange for some form of casual native dress, tunic, shirt, whatever the peasants now wore. It shocked him to think that he did not know even such elementary things about his native land. From the railway station where he would get off he would set out to walk. After that his future would shape itself. Bearded again, with the Polish identity Carfax had given him and another new name, Boris Sudenic would disappear for ever.

Before he left the ship on the shore leave from which he would not return, he asked to see the captain and alone with him in his cabin handed him an open letter and said, "If I may ask you, please sir, to read this."

"A letter to your wife? You want me to read it?"

"Please. And take it to post in England, not in Poland. There is the censorship."

The skipper was used to odd requests, so he did not argue but took the letter from the envelope. It stated simply, *'Sergei Voliniak, suffering from incurable cancer, will not return to England to distress still more his dear wife. He wishes to die in his beloved Poland.'*

The skipper looked up at the vigorous bearded figure standing so quietly before him. He simply said, "You're leaving us then, Voliniak?"

"Yes, sir."

"I could keep you on board. Forbid a last shore leave before

we sail tomorrow.''

"I would swim there.''

The captain ignored this defiance which he knew was complete.

"It will be impossible to replace you here in Poland.''

"In Sweden, sir, it will be easy. That is not far.''

A flash of annoyance lit the skipper's blue eyes. "Perhaps you'd like to suggest a few names.''

Boris was silent. After a second or two the skipper handed him back the letter and envelope, which was addressed to Carfax.

"Better seal it yourself,'' he said. "I'll post it in Harwich.''

When he had it back he put it down on his table and held out his hand.

"Good luck,'' he said. "Whoever you are.''

Boris thanked him. He had complete confidence in this man; he knew his letter would be posted and that the captain would never disclose to anyone any part of their conversation.

In the evening, two days later, in the heart of Poland, Boris walked away from the railway into a land he knew and loved, whose people he understood, whose language he spoke, whose present conditions he meant to accept and in whose future, however it might develop, he meant to share.

The captain posted Boris's letter as he had promised. When he read it, Carfax at once arranged to go down to Reading, taking the letter with him. It would not surprise Mrs. Voliniak, he knew, for he had, immediately on learning of her husband's death and Boris's fresh disappearance, taken steps to prevent any inquiry and unwanted publicity by informing the widow that her husband wanted her to know he had gone to sea again. This, Carfax calculated, would keep her quiet until he had further news to offer her and could lead her, unspectacularly, to accept the fact of his death. All thoroughly unethical, he knew, but entirely necessary.

Mrs. Voliniak took the letter and Carfax's explanations, limited to the voyage of the *Gertrude*, very quietly. She cried a little, but said she had suspected it from the time he left her, only a couple of days out of hospital, to go and see a friend in London.

"I knew at the time it was phoney,'' she said. "He took his sea clothes with him, I found out afterwards. That spoke for itself.

They told me at the hospital he hadn't more than a month or two to live. It's my belief he guessed it himself from the start. Cancer patients often do, don't they?''

"Yes,'' Carfax answered.

"I don't blame him,'' she went on. "It was to spare me and the children partly, as he says. We were happy enough together, though he was away a lot, of course. But he never really settled down in England. Foreigners don't, do they?''

"Sometimes they do,'' Carfax said. "Not very often.''

He began to hint, as tactfully as possible, that she might be in need of financial assistance and perhaps he could put her in touch—

"No,'' she told him. "That Polish gentleman that shot himself. You won't know this – it didn't come out in the papers – but he was the son of the old Count Sudenic that Sergei worked for as a lad. He told me that. This Mr. Sudenic went to the hospital to see him twice. Well, he must've been told about Sergei's illness, because he's left him quite a bit of money in his will.''

"Indeed?'' Carfax said. "I'm very glad to hear it.''

So, he thought, would not be the governments of England, Russia, Sweden, Denmark and perhaps others. But then none of them, except England, would ever know.

"Yes,'' Mrs. Voliniak went on. "The solicitor, a Mr. Phillimore, wrote and a Polish gentleman came to see me – elderly man. I couldn't pronounce his name. Very kind and considerate. He told me—''

She broke down again and Carfax took his leave of her. He wondered how much old Sczilіekowicz really knew. He had attended the funeral of the supposed Boris Sudenic. Come to think of it he had told him he was winding up Boris's affairs. This was part of his mission, evidently. With the help of Ann's lawyer brother. Perjury on the part of the legal profession itself. All in a good cause – or was it? What were we all coming to?

Carfax went back to London. The Sudenic file was closed. One more case disposed of, perhaps permanently. He devoutly hoped so. A very troublesome alien.

In the Brentwood family circle the secret of Boris's escape leaked by degrees during the next few months, until every member knew exactly what had happened. In her growing contentment and happiness Margaret refused to keep anything

back from Colin and he, who would never be able wholly to rely on the continuance of his present good fortune, was careful not to argue or criticize or even blame any of them for keeping him in ignorance for so long.

Together he and Margaret regretted Boris's lawlessness, his instability. His frightful experiences had ruined him, they concluded. He had lost his principles, his code of decent conduct, everything that meant civilized living. They thanked God that Britain had retained these things, at least in the circles that mattered.

As for the Ogdens, they had guessed the course of events quite accurately. Putting together the detail from hints and fragments of conversation they had heard was child's play to them. As servants who had lived in their employers' homes all their lives, they had acquired a special technique, not exactly of eavesdropping, but of becoming aware of most of the family secrets and all of the family goings-on.

Late that autumn Ogden came in from brushing leaves under the trees at the bottom of the garden. He had been reminded of the summer days when Mrs. Colin and Mr. Sudenic had sat there, talking, screened from the house and all prying eyes.

"Seems he was a spy," Ogden said, "but I reckon he never told her nowt."

"That's why she was so mad at him, poor lad," Mrs. Ogden said, pityingly.

"I don't believe that other chap did himself in. They Russians got 'im. Silencer on the gun, it said int'papers. What for'd he use that to kill himself?"

"Happen you're right, Sam, but it don't do to go repeating it. Spy or no spy, that warn't the reason 'e come here."

"Not reason?"

"Nay."

"Then why?"

"Just wanted to live," said Mrs. Ogden, firmly. "Like 'e always had. Like any normal creature should and does. No one couldn't have gone through what 'e did without he clung to life itself. Just that. It's what he's doing now, I'll be bound. Take a lot, it would, to put that one under. 'E ' ad the will."

"You make it overly simple, Martha. The lad were double spy, as they call it. Mr. Colin knows and that Mr. Carfax. Not

straightforward at all, it weren't. You should listen to them. Hear what I've heard."

"Oh, aye, *them*," said Mrs. Ogden, unconvinced. "They're the clever ones."

THE END

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